DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 442 503 JC 000 427

AUTHOR	Aarts, Sandra; Blower, Deb; Burke, Roberta; Conlin, Eleanor; Howell, Brent; Howorth, Carol Ebner; Lamarre, Gine He; Van Kleeb, Joy
TITLE	A Slice of the Iceberg: Cross-Canada Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition.
INSTITUTION	Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment, Belleville (Ontario).
SPONS AGENCY	Human Resources Development Canada, Ottawa (Ontario).
PUB DATE	1999-11-00
NOTE	189p.; Title page varies.
AVAILABLE FROM	Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment, P.O. Box 20135, Belleville, Ontario, Canada, K8N5V1. ($20 within Canada or USA; $25 outside Canada/USA).
PUB TYPE	Numerical/Quantitative Data (110) -- Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC08 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Educational Assessment; *Educational Planning; Foreign Countries; Government School Relationship; Higher Education; *Nontraditional Students; Program Implementation; *Student Characteristics
IDENTIFIERS	Canada; *Prior Learning Assessment

ABSTRACT

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) is a sound academic practice that contributes to adult learning by linking formal and informal learning. However, it has not been widely accepted by Canadian educational institutions. In 1996, a consortium of seven colleges and an independent PLAR consultant began a study to create a comprehensive database of PLAR learners and their characteristics, identify PLAR activities in participating institutions, analyze the effects of PLAR on students and the institutions, and compare the costs of credits achieved through PLAR with those produced through traditional course delivery. Study results found that: the average course grades of PLAR learners are as high or higher than those of traditional students in the same programs; PLAR strengthened adult learners' confidence and represented important efficiencies for part-time adult learners by shortening their programs; the low number of PLAR learners and programs signal that delivery of PLAR has not been economical for some institutions; early benefits from PLAR training within institutions diminished over time; and there is a need for greater public awareness of PLAR. The report concludes with a series of recommendations addressing institutions, public policy makers, adult learners, and workplaces. (Contains 30 references, 31 tables and charts, and 14 appendices.) (JA)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 442 503

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND
DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS
BEEN GRANTED BY

J. Van Kleef

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

- Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

A Slice of the Iceberg:

Cross-Canada Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition

JC 000427

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

A Slice of the Iceberg:

Cross-Canada Study on Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition

Prepared by:

Sandra Aarts, Fanshawe College
Deb Blower, Red River College
Roberta Burke, Mohawk College
Eleanor Conlin, Conestoga College
Brent Howell, College of the North Atlantic
Carol Ebner Howorth, Douglas College
Ginette Lamarre, College Ahuntsic
Joy Van Kleef, PLAR Consultant

November 1999

Copyright © 1999 by the Cross-Canada Partnership on PLAR. All, rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the authors.

Cover Photo: John Harrington

CONTENTS

TABLES AND CHARTS iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS v
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY vii
PREFACE xiii

PART ONE

INTRODUCTION 1
PURPOSE OF THE STUDY 4
  Phase One 4
  Review of Literature and Implications for the Study 5
  Initial Research Methodology 6
  Formal Commitment of Participating Institutions to the Study 8
  Recruitment of an Advisory Committee 8

PART TWO

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY 9
  Introduction 9
  Learner/Student Data Collection 9
  Learner/Student Data Analysis 11
RESULTS AND OBSERVATIONS 12
  Study Participants 12
  Characteristics of PLAR Learners 14
  PLAR Assessments 26
  PLAR Program Activity 32
  PLAR Learner Success 35
  Summary of Learner/Student Data Analysis 40
  Evaluation of Military Training 42

PART THREE

FINANCIAL ANALYSIS OF PLAR ACTIVITIES IN 1996/97 45
  Introduction 45
  Data Collection Methodology 45
  Financial Analysis 47
  Summary of Financial Analysis for 1996/97 60

PART FOUR

FOCUS GROUPS 61
  Introduction 61
  Data Analysis 62
  Summary and Observations on Focus Group Sessions 65

PART FIVE

LIMITATIONS OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS 67
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS 68
  Introduction 68
  Key Findings 69
  Recommendations 71

PART SIX

STUDY PARTICIPANTS 75
BIBLIOGRAPHY 79
APPENDICES 81
  Appendix A – Glossary of Terms 81
  Appendix B – Memorandum of Understanding 85
  Appendix C – Authorship Agreement 87
  Appendix D – Advisory Committee Membership 88
  Appendix E – Institutional Profiles 91
  Appendix F – Glance at Us Today Reports 1998/99 93
  Appendix G – Data Collection Fields in Data Collection Tool 107
  Appendix H – Traditional Student Programs 108
  Appendix I – Detailed Report on Data Collection on PLAR Learners and Traditional Students 109
  Appendix J – Detailed Report on Data Collection for Financial Analysis 115
  Appendix K – Average per Course Costs 1996/97 126
  Appendix L – Focus Group Protocol 129
  Appendix M – Focus Group Reports 135
  Appendix N – Study Partner Contacts 173

6

TABLES AND CHARTS

TABLES

1. Total Number of PLAR Learner and TRAD Student Enrolments by Year 13
2. Gender Breakdown of PLAR Learners by Institution 14
3. Age Distribution of PLAR Learners by Institution 17
4. Comparison of Age Categories of PLAR Learners and TRAD Students in the Same Programs 18
5. Number and Percentage of Full-time PLAR Learners who Paid Both Tuition and an Assessment Fee for the Same Course 22
6. Number of assessments per PLAR Learner 28
7. Single Program PLAR Learners in 2 and 3 Year Programs: Comparison of Assessments Conducted in the First and Last Year of their Programs 29
8. Annual Number of PLAR Assessments by Method at Six Institutions 31
8B. Annual Number of PLAR Assessments by Method (Fanshawe College Only) 31
9. Top Ten Programs by Institution 32
10. Conversion Table for Grades in Courses Acquired Through PLAR 35
11. Direct Costs and Contribution to Overhead of Non-assessment PLAR Activities in 1996/97 by Institution 47
12. Revenues Generated by PLAR Assessment Delivery in 1996/97 49
13. Institutional Policies and Practices on Assessment Fees 50
14. PLAR Assessment Direct Costs and Contribution to Institutional Overhead at College Ahuntsic, College of the North Atlantic, Douglas College and Red River College 51
14B. PLAR Assessments' Direct Costs and Contribution to Institutional Overhead at Conestoga College, Fanshawe College and Mohawk College 51
15. Indirect Costs for PLAR Assessments 52
16. Average Direct Cost per Course of PLAR Assessments and Traditional Courses in Selected Programs at Four Institutions (1996/97) 54
16B. Average Direct Cost per Course of PLAR Assessments and Traditional Courses in Selected Programs at Three Institutions (1996/97) 55
17. Contribution after Direct Cost Deductions per Course 56
18. Methods of Assessor Remuneration Over and Above Normal Workload Payments 57
19. Average Course Costs for Paulette (PLAR Learner) Compared to Average Course Costs for Tracey (Traditional Student) in 1996/97 ....

59

CHARTS

1. Gender Breakdown of PLAR Learners and TRAD Students in the Same Programs 15
2. Age Distribution of PLAR Learners by Institution 16
3. Status of PLAR Learners at Each Institution 19
4. Student Status of PLAR Learners and TRAD Students in the Same Programs 20
5. Student Status by Age Category 21
6. Percentages of PLAR Learners Who Received Orientation to PLAR 23
7. Number of PLAR Assessments by Year 26
8. Total Number of Assessments by Discipline 34
9. Average Grades of PLAR Learners and TRAD Students 36
10. PLAR Learners' Average Course Grades by Assessment Method 37
11. Percentage of Courses in Which PLAR Learners and TRAD Students were Successful 38
12. Average Number of Courses Taken by Full-time and Part-time PLAR Learners Compared to TRAD Students 39

8

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our deep appreciation to the many people who helped us to complete this Study. First, we express thanks to Human Resources Development Canada for their financial support and in particular Ms. Daniela DiBartolo for her unwavering confidence that we would conduct a study that would be of high quality and value to institutions, public policy makers, adult learners, and workplaces. We also wish to extend sincere appreciation to Dr. Merl Wahlstrom, our academic advisor. Dr. Wahlstrom is Professor and Chair of the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. His constant guidance and common sense approach to evaluation contributed greatly to the partnership's capacity to work through problems of design, data collection and evaluation. His encouraging words at the end of long meetings and complex discussions never failed to renew our commitment to PLAR and to this project.

We also could not have accomplished this task without the hard work and creative efforts of consultant Rob McInnis, of Decision Express. We are grateful to Rob for his help in preparing the charts and graphs and in ensuring that the collected data were as error-free as possible.

We also appreciate the efforts of each of the institutional partners' colleagues who assisted in the student and cost data collection processes, in particular, Denise Bouchard, Carolle Brassard and Sabine Smeulders at College Ahuntsic; Barbara Bond, Brenda Barringtom, Evelyn Doyle, Donna Feltham, Wayne Hann and Joanne O'Leary at College of the North Atlantic; Gordana Damjanovic, Jennifer Gilmour, Krista Greidanus, Fred Harris, Janeen Hoover, Laura Eaglesham, Elaine Mullen and Sharon Flood at Conestoga College; Trish Angus, Bob Cowin, Roy Daykin and Dean Hiebert at Douglas College; Barbara Dalby and Linda England at Fanshawe College; Rob McInnis and Betty Chou at Mohawk College; and Marilyn Morrice, Tatiana Slatuvsk and Gordon McBean at Red River College.

The Study Advisory Committee has also been a constant support to the partners. We would like to express our appreciation to each member for the time and attention they volunteered to ensure that this Study would be accurate, credible, and practical. Many thanks to Daniela DiBartolo, Rick Dedi, Mia Gordon, Gilles Lavoie, Douglas Myers, Robert Rideout and Paul Zakos.

The co-operation and assistance we received from Finance personnel at each of the institutions was also invaluable. We would like to express our appreciation to Kevin Mullen, Laura Eaglesham, Betty Chou, Roy Daykin, Cathy Rushton, Roland Sterling and Robert Rideout.

Sincere appreciation is extended to the moderators, PLAR learners and faculty assessors whose contributions to the focus group process provided invaluable insights into aspects of PLAR that cannot be obtained through quantitative data analysis.

The generosity of administrators at the NODE distance education communications system at the University of Western Ontario allowed the partners to share their ideas and resolve issues on a continuing basis throughout the project. We are grateful to Cathy Boak and Darryl Pieber for arranging the use of the NODE conferencing system, without which this project could not have been undertaken.

Finally, I would like to take advantage of my report drafting duties to express my personal thanks to all of my partners in this project, Sandra Aarts, Deb Blower, Roberta Burke, Eleanor Conlin, Carol Ebner Howorth, Brent Howell and Ginette Lamarre for their commitment, hard work and support throughout this Study. The ideas and encouragement we received from one another provided the energy we needed to complete this very difficult task.

Joy Van Kleef
Cross-Canada Study Co-ordinator

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Cross-Canada Study on PLAR has been conducted by a partnership of six colleges, one college of general and professional education (cegep) and an independent PLAR consultant. Funded by Human Resources Development Canada, the Study has undertaken an approach similar to case study research to investigate PLAR activities at seven institutions across Canada from 1993/94 to 1997/98. This report attempts to present valid and reliable research in a format that is readable and interesting to a broad audience of institutions, public policy makers, adult learners and workplaces.

The partnership is comprised of College Ahuntsic (cegep), Quebec, College of the North Atlantic, Newfoundland; Conestoga College, Ontario; Douglas College, British Columbia; Fanshawe College, Ontario; Mohawk College, Ontario; Red River College, Manitoba; and an independent PLAR consultant from Ontario.

Research on adult learning is extensive. The works of Allen Tough, Malcolm Knowles, David Kolb and others, form the foundation of many modern adult education and assessment practices. The title of this report is based on a metaphorical "iceberg" created by Tough (1976) which is now a symbol used by many Canadian adult educators. It depicts the concept that only a small percentage of adult learning is recognized in our society but most learning exists below the surface where it is more difficult to identify, assess and recognize in any formal way. Little is known about the nature of informal learning and its relationship to formal learning. Although PLAR is one bridging mechanism claimed by proponents to increase recognition of informal learning, there has been little research conducted in Canada on PLAR and its impact on learners and institutions. Much of the evidence of PLAR's efficacy is based on limited, anecdotal accounts of the experiences of individuals and specific projects.

The purpose of the Cross-Canada Study on PLAR is to elicit valid information on PLAR in Canada and to observe whether PLAR lowers the waterline on the "iceberg" by increasing recognition of informal learning. It is hoped that the information provided will assist institutions, governments, adult learners and workplaces with their decision-making on the funding, development, delivery, use and evaluation of new and existing PLAR services.

Through a combination of statistical data collection, analysis and focus groups, the Study has gathered extensive information on: characteristics of PLAR learners, PLAR activities, the impact of the PLAR experience from the learners' and institutions' perspectives, and the costs of PLAR. Observations are made on how PLAR learners compare with traditional students in post-secondary programs with respect to demographics and academic achievement.

Phase One of the Study commenced with a literature review. Although there has been little formal research on PLAR in Canada, and limited international literature, findings are consistent that PLAR is a sound academic practice that benefits adult learners and institutions. This Cross-Canada Study on PLAR builds on these studies. Phase One also included the development of a preliminary methodology which helped the partners determine whether the project was feasible.

Research

At the beginning of Phase Two, the partners established a pan-Canadian advisory committee to provide overall advice and provide feedback at each stage of the Study. Six research objectives were established. They were to:

- create a comprehensive database of PLAR learners and their academic activities over a 5-year period as well as a sampling of traditional students
- identify characteristics of PLAR learners
- identify PLAR activities at participating institutions
- analyze the effects of PLAR on learners and participating institutions
- assess the costs of credits/courses achieved through PLAR
- compare the costs of credits/courses produced through PLAR with the cost of credits/courses produced through traditional course delivery

These objectives have been achieved through: statistical data collection of academic activities of all PLAR learners and a sampling of traditional students at each institution from 1993/94 to 1997/98, focus group sessions with assessors and former PLAR learners, and financial analysis on the costs of PLAR and traditional course delivery.

A central data repository has been established containing a 72-megabyte database on the college-level courses and programs taken by more than 3,500 PLAR learners from 1993/94 to 1997/98 (partial year for some institutions). Quantitative data include information on 7,900 assessments in over 1,400 courses as well as the 40,000 courses and over 360 programs PLAR learners took through traditional delivery. Data on a sampling of almost 12,000 traditional students in 58 programs have also been included for the purpose of comparison with the PLAR learners. The records of over 237,000 courses taken by traditional students are included. Additional data has been compiled by College Ahuntsic with respect to PLAR assessment of military training programs in 1996/97. Qualitative data were compiled from focus groups of 65 PLAR learners in 22 programs and 50 assessors from 37 programs.

Analysis

The statistical data, focus group reports and institutional information are analyzed and synthesized in this report. Two levels of PLAR activity are examined: the national and institutional levels. Three types of analysis are conducted: descriptive analysis involving descriptive data findings, comparative analysis involving findings related to two or more sets of data and interpretive analysis involving the integration of several data findings. The analysis is conducted in relation to two time frames: annual and the five-year study period. Limitations on the Study's data collection and data analysis activities are reported.

The analysis of quantitative and qualitative data in this Study provides Canada's first national picture of the individuals who are accessing PLAR and of the institutional activities involved in assessment for credit. It also provides some clues for future research about learners who are not accessing PLAR and the reasons for their absence. Institutional profiles provide a useful snapshot of the context in which PLAR was operating at the mid-point of the study period and a series of Glance at Us Today reports link the study period to what is happening in PLAR at the time of publication (1999).

Key Findings

The Study results show that:

- Adult learners did have educationally relevant, college-level prior learning that could be successfully assessed and recognized within post-secondary educational settings. PLAR learners were successful students.
  The evidence indicates that PLAR learners earned solid grades in their courses acquired through PLAR and in their courses delivered through traditional delivery. Their average course grades were as high or higher than the average course grades of traditional students in the same programs. Their pass rates were higher. They took more courses than traditional students and graduated at a higher rate. Their graduation grade point averages were slightly higher.
- PLAR strengthened adult learners' confidence in their own capacities to learn and motivated adults to pursue further education.
- PLAR represented important efficiencies for part-time adult learners by shortening their programs, reducing course loads and reducing costs. It was particularly beneficial to part-time students who decided to return to education to achieve employment-related training and occupational credentials.
- A motivating factor behind support for PLAR at all participant institutions was a strong faculty-based commitment to adult learning.
- PLAR can be effectively used as a marketing tool to attract learners requiring training for employment or occupational certification. It is also an effective tool to market college programs to potential students over the age of 30 years.
- The low numbers of PLAR learners and programs in which PLAR was accessed over the five-year study period, are disturbing signals that delivery of PLAR assessments under the same financial arrangements has not been economical for some institutions.
- The public policy focus on PLAR diminished at some institutions over the study period and resulted in a reduction in resources for PLAR development.
- Although there are exceptions, the "new learner" who would not attend college if it were not for PLAR, may not have materialized to the extent originally anticipated.
- Lack of agreement and clarity around remuneration for conducting assessments had a detrimental effect on learners and on faculty support for PLAR.
- Further diversification of assessment practices and tools would help learners more fully demonstrate their knowledge and skills.
- Early benefits from PLAR training within institutions diminished over time at some institutions due to restructuring, attrition, budget cuts and emphasis on other reform initiatives. There is a need for renewed emphasis on PLAR training that supports faculty in developing new assessment practices that are cost efficient and valid measurement tools.
- Opportunities for full-time learners to benefit from PLAR through shortened programs, lighter course loads or lower costs were impaired by rigid "lock step" program delivery structures and government regulations that eliminate eligibility for student assistance.
- There is a need for greater public awareness of PLAR and marketing strategies geared toward workplaces, occupational associations and sectoral organizations.
- Improved transfer of credit mechanisms across institutions and jurisdictions would enhance PLAR's capacity to facilitate recognition of prior learning. Evaluation of military training conducted by College Ahuntsic for example, could be transferable if linkages across institutions were enhanced.
- There is a need for further research into several issues cited but not addressed in this Study including, more comprehensive financial analyses, the role PLAR plays in motivating learners to return to formal study, cross-institutional comparisons within jurisdictions, short-term and long-term incentives to provide PLAR, and the role of volunteerism in providing PLAR services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Institutions

Should undertake a review of PLAR services and assessment practices using the findings of this report as a basis for discussion and action to:

- Ensure that written policies and procedures are implemented and practiced by all program administrators and faculty.
- Ensure that written information on PLAR procedures as well as criteria for earning credit is readily available to learners.
- Provide PLAR training to all new, full-time and part-time faculty as well as existing faculty who conduct assessments, focusing particularly on learning outcomes and authentic assessment practices.
- Resolve faculty concerns regarding fair and consistent assessor remuneration practices.
- Market PLAR vigorously with workplaces and occupational bodies to increase PLAR activities within a context of strategic partnerships in training and education.
- Review institutional PLAR facilitation practices to evaluate the impact of centralization vs integration of PLAR services
- Integrate PLAR into educational reform activities and institutional strategic plans.
- Conduct research into PLAR with a view to contributing to a growing body of knowledge on the relationship between formal and informal learning and the impact of PLAR on institutions and adult learners in Canada.
- Develop course registration/credit systems to facilitate flexible delivery thus allowing students with prior learning to complete programs sooner.

Public Policy Makers

Undertake a review of this report and use it as a basis for discussion and action to:

- Revise current public policy and the role of government in supporting PLAR in post-secondary institutions (for example, allowing Registered Educational Savings Plan funds (RESP) to be accessed for post-secondary PLAR, and permitting PLAR learners to retain their eligibility for student assistance).
- Support PLAR and apply that support to provide funding to institutions to the same degree that traditional course delivery is supported.
- Support initiatives that promote PLAR research, assessment tool development and assessor training.
- Assist institutions to improve mechanisms for facilitating transfer of credits across institutions and provinces. For example, credits acquired through the evaluation of military training should be transferable from one province to another.

Adult Learners

Read this Study report and be aware of the benefits of PLAR to:

- Reference this Study in supporting requests for recognition of prior learning
- Be assertive in requesting recognition for prior learning
- Maintain career portfolios that contain evidence of knowledge and competencies acquired outside of formal learning activities
- Commit to lifelong learning, building on prior learning whenever possible.

Workplaces

Study this report with an aim to:

- Be proactive in requesting that PLAR be incorporated into training provided by educational institutions
- Maintain complete records of in-house training and participation
- Encourage the use of documented portfolio evidence for recruitment, promotion and other career opportunities
- Develop strategic partnerships with education and training providers

In summary, PLAR is an academically sound practice that contributes to adult learning. It successfully links informal learning to formal learning. It improves adults' confidence in their own knowledge and skills and it enhances the chances of continuation of learning over the long term. PLAR contributes to learners' employability.

Partner institutions' clear commitment to the notion of PLAR has meant that they have delivered services despite significant financial loss relative to traditional course delivery. PLAR's future depends on adequate support from public policy makers and on the development of demand from sources external to the institutions. If PLAR has a legitimate place in improving employability and occupational competency, it will likely be through strategic partnerships between institutions and business and industry. It is the hope of the Study partners that institutions and policy makers will use this report to re-examine their positions on PLAR and take action to reduce barriers to learners and enhance institutional services to learners and their external communities.

In the interest of facilitating future research into PLAR, the Cross-Canada Study partnership has agreed to make the database and the data collection tool used in this project, available to any post-secondary organization in Canada for non-profit purposes. At the time of printing this report, discussions for finding a "home" for the database and the tool were in progress. In these ways, areas of interest not raised in this report can be independently explored and efforts to learn more about the impact of PLAR on learners and institutions can continue beyond the life of the Study.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

PREFACE

Since its inception at Mohawk College in 1977, prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) has grown in post-secondary institutions across Canada. However, its development has been constrained by structural and attitudinal limitations of governments and education systems. PLAR has not been widely accepted in Canada as an integral part of the business of educational institutions. The Cross-Canada Study Partners believe that PLAR's limited success stems in part, from the lack of reliable data on PLAR and its impact on individuals and institutions. This Study was initiated because of a strong desire on the part of its authors to increase awareness and understanding of PLAR in Canada. It is our hope that this report will provide information to institutions and other educational policy decision-makers that will lead to action to renew PLAR implementation efforts and improve PLAR services.

Conducting this Study was an important learning experience in itself. New knowledge was gained about how PLAR is conducted in our institutions. We have also learned about the challenges of working on a project that includes geographic barriers, language differences, policy and practice varitations, inconsistencies in terminology, financial limitations, technological problems, and the prospect of collecting enormous amounts of data that are only accessible through manipulation of complex information systems or manual research and data entry. The rewards have also been immense from an interpersonal perspective. The team of seven PLAR Facilitators and one PLAR consultant has been strong throughout this Study which is a credit to the institutional partners who were required to complete the Study tasks in addition to their usual work responsibilities.

Part One of this report provides a summary of the historical background leading to the Study, a summary of Phase One and a brief literature review; there have been few sources of published research on PLAR in Canada. Part One provides important contextual information on PLAR's introduction into Canada and the partner institutions. Readers will find this information useful for interpreting the Study's findings. It will be valuable to researchers interested in conducting similar projects particularly those that include participation across a large geographical area.

Part Two presents the research methodology and results of the Study's quantitative data analysis on PLAR activities. This section also compares PLAR learners and their academic activities to a sampling of traditional students in a selection of programs. They will be particularly useful to institutions, practitioners and policy makers concerned with implementing or improving PLAR services. We also hope the results will be of value to adult learners who wish to obtain recognition for prior learning.

Part Three presents the research methodology and results of the Study's financial analysis of PLAR. It will be of particular interest to financial administrators, policy makers and funders of public education concerned that PLAR should be a financially viable activity.

Part Four reports the results of focus group sessions held with PLAR learners and assessors at each of the partner institutions. The input provided by these individuals has been integrated into data analysis in Part Two. The qualitative data provided by focus groups participants will be useful to institutions, occupational bodies, policy makers and workplaces interested in learning more about PLAR from users' perspectives and in using PLAR to improve service and provide richer learning experiences.

Part Five offers key findings and recommendations. It is intended to provide readers with a sense of the current state of PLAR in Canada and the prospects for its future. All stakeholders will find it useful in their deliberations on actions that need to be taken to strengthen PLAR in our educational systems and beyond.

Part Six of this report contains biographical and contact information on the authors and the bibliography. Extensive appendices follow the bibliography.

This Study explores many elements of PLAR at work in our Canadian institutions. It is intended to examine whether or not PLAR helps learners to achieve their educational goals by facilitating recognition of their prior learning. It is also intended to examine what difference if any, PLAR in Canada has made to the operations of colleges. The goal of the partners is to inform decision-makers at all levels and to encourage them to take action to improve PLAR services and thereby enhance access to education for adult learners. Initial findings indicate that PLAR has high value for learners and can enrich the college experience for learners and faculty. As a result, it is important to address current barriers to efficient, effective delivery and to expand services to meet the educational needs of all adult learners.

PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) initiatives began in Canada in 1977 with the implementation of pilot projects at Mohawk College in Hamilton, Ontario. Implementation commenced on a similar basis at Red River Community College in Winnipeg, Manitoba in 1980. Although historically, colleges have used various strategies to recognize adults' formal and informal learning, these were among the first institutions in Canada to focus on activities specifically designated as prior learning assessment. In 1984, the Quebec government passed a regulation requiring the province's Colleges of General and Professional Education (Cegeps) to award credit for non-academic learning. A series of projects were initiated in 1985/86 and in 1987 the Quebec Department of Higher Education and Science and the federal Department of Employment and Immigration funded a three-year subsidy program for Quebec Cegeps. Funding was directed at training, research, assessment tool development, project implementation and liaison with other organizations (Isabelle, 1988, p.167). The Quebec initiative was followed by PLAR implementation at First Nations Technical Institute in Ontario in 1987. With the exception of Quebec, no federal or provincial governments were directly involved in supporting the above initiatives.

In 1993, the Ontario government commenced a three-year PLA implementation subsidy program for community colleges, providing grants for designated staff and funding for assessments through the educational operating grant. By 1996, all 25 Ontario colleges were required to provide prior learning assessment services to their adult learners. From 1993 to 1998, many post-secondary institutions across Canada explored and implemented PLA principles and methods including Douglas and other colleges in British Columbia, Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (SIAST), Nova Scotia Community College and Cabot College in Newfoundland. In 1997 the term Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) was adopted by the Canadian Labour Force Development Board, Human Resources Development Canada and several provinces and institutions. It was also adopted as the default term for the purposes of this report. However, throughout the report, the terms PLA and PLAR are used, based on the policies of each jurisdiction and should be considered interchangeable.

The early period of PLAR development in Canada (1982 to 1993) is relevant to this study because it forms the backdrop for the variety of ways in which PLAR was implemented at the institutions participating in this research project. The contexts in which PLAR evolved at the partner institutions varied from economic, political, policy and organizational perspectives. The degree of PLAR development at each institution at the beginning and during the five-year study period also varied. These factors have a limiting effect on the degree to which comparisons can be made; but they also present a rich variety of ideas to readers contemplating PLAR implementation or modification. A brief outline of the different contexts in which the partner institutions have operated follows and is supplemented by important information presented in the Institutional Profiles in the appendices, which also should be considered when comparing PLAR activity at the partner institutions.

Historical Context of PLAR at Partner Institutions

The Study partnership is comprised of College Ahuntsic, Quebec, College of the North Atlantic, Newfoundland; Conestoga College, Ontario; Douglas College, British Columbia; Fanshawe College, Ontario; Mohawk College, Ontario; Red River College, Manitoba; and an independent PLAR consultant from Ontario.

College Ahuntsic

College Ahuntsic in Quebec began providing PLAR services to adult learners in all its programs in 1985/86. A PLA Facilitator was in place in the early years of implementation but during the five-year study period, several college advisors who assisted PLAR candidates on a part-time basis played the Facilitator role. The College followed extensive provincial PLAR policies that applied to all cegeps and during the study period received provincial funding for assessments on the basis of 30% of the funding granted for a regular part-time course. If additional studies were required for learners to "top-up" their learning, the Province provided an additional 40%. No tuition was charged by any Quebec cegep for full-time learners but part-time PLA learners were required to pay assessment fees at a rate of $2.00 per course-hour. College Ahuntsic also established a PLA procedure to evaluate workplace training acquired in the Canadian Armed Forces and became a major center for assessing military training programs for academic credit. A full-time co-ordinator administered the program and evaluations under contract with the Department of National Defense. Equivalencies were given for military training. During the full study period, College Ahuntsic's PLAR services were in full operation.

College of the North Atlantic

In August 1992, the Newfoundland and Labrador Council on Higher Education was established to develop a mechanism and process for coordination and articulation among and across sectors of the province's educational system. In 1994 Cabot College received funding from the Council to host a conference on PLA and from Human Resources Development Canada to develop and deliver PLA training to post-secondary institutions in the province. Following the establishment of a provincial task force, the Council on Higher Education began a two-year initiative to develop and implement PLA within the post-secondary sector. PLA co-ordinators were designated on a part-time basis at most of the five public colleges to coordinate implementation activities. During the study period, institutions received no specific funding and were required to provide services out of existing program budgets.

The context in which the College of the North Atlantic commenced PLA activities is particularly important to note when reviewing the statistical data in this report due to organizational re-structuring that took place in Newfoundland in 1997/98. Prior to this date, the province had nine colleges; Cabot College in St. John's being the most active in PLA. In 1997/98 the colleges were amalgamated into a single college and Cabot College became part of the College of the North Atlantic. The PLA and traditional student data in this Study are drawn from the records of the former Cabot College. There is anecdotal evidence that more PLA was conducted than is recorded in this report. However, records were particularly difficult to locate in the aftermath of the re-organization. The data included in this report are the only verifiable records available. In keeping with the Study's quality assurance standard that only assessments for which clear records could be obtained would be included in the Study, the statistics attributed to the College of the North Atlantic reflect a lower than actual level of PLA activity at the Prince Phillip Drive campus. Further, during the study period, Cabot College was just beginning its exploration into PLA, focusing its activities on a project basis in a few program areas. The extent of institutional policy development and assessment activity across the College was not as developed as in the other partner institutions.

Douglas College

Douglas College began formal implementation of PLA through small pilot projects in 1993. In 1994 Douglas received funding in the form of Innovations Funds that were made available to institutions wishing to explore PLA. In 1995 the British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer (BCCAT) undertook responsibility for PLA provincial guidelines and policy development and in the same year, the provincial government introduced a three-year program of declining PLA Implementation Grants for colleges that wished to begin a program of PLA implementation.

Douglas College received this grant and used it to support a part-time position of Facilitator. During the five-year study period Douglas College implemented PLA in various career programs, using its PLA educational policy (1988) as an internal guideline to supplement the provincial PLA Guidelines. Under the direction of a Cross-College PLA Task Force, Douglas College became active in providing assessments and recognition part-way through the study period in 1995. Assessment fees charged to learners were the same as the course tuition fee for a traditional student.

Conestoga College, Fanshawe College, Mohawk College

The Ontario colleges participating in this Study (Conestoga College, Fanshawe College and Mohawk College) were part of a provincial initiative in 1992 that reflected an emphasis in provincial policy on improving access to education and training. Ontario colleges were required to plan for full implementation of PLA by the end of 1995/96. In 1993, a three-year PLA implementation phase began at each institution and included PLA policy development, faculty and staff training, learning outcomes and assessment tool development, pilot projects and limited marketing activities. The Ministry of Education directed $3.0 million to be used to create a full-time PLA Facilitator position at each institution. The Ministry also provided limited funding for assessment delivery. Assessment fees were charged to PLAR learners. By 1996/97 targeted funding had ended and colleges were required to support PLA coordination, administration, training and development through their own operating budgets. Ministry funding for conducting assessments continued at the rate set in 1993/94. In 1996/97 Conestoga College decentralized PLAR and distributed PLAR responsibilities across the College. Fanshawe and Mohawk Colleges continued to have permanent full-time PLA Facilitators throughout the study period.

Red River College

Red River College first implemented PLA in two specialized programs, Nursing and Early Childhood Education in the early 1980's. In 1992 the College reviewed its Experiential Learning policy (1984) and undertook development of institution-wide PLA policies and procedures that would increase adult learners' access to prior learning assessment. The policies and procedures were approved in 1994 and a college-wide system was devised. A full-time Facilitator position and office was established in 1995 and funded by the Province through the college's base budget. The college received no specific provincial funding for PLA assessments throughout the study period and was required to provide assessments out of existing program budgets, administrative fees and assessment fees. Throughout the five years of the Study, PLA expanded in both full-time and part-time programs. There were no specific province-wide government policies on PLA during the course of the Study.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Research on adult learning is extensive. The works of Allen Tough, Malcolm Knowles, David Kolb and others, form the foundation of many modern adult education and assessment practices. The title of this report is based on a metaphorical "iceberg" created by Tough (1976) which is now a symbol used by many Canadian adult educators. It depicts the concept that only a small percentage of adult learning is recognized in our society and but most learning exists below the surface where it is more difficult to identify, assess and recognize in any formal way. Little is known about the nature of informal learning and its relationship to formal learning. Although PLAR is one bridging mechanism claimed by proponents to increase recognition of informal learning, there has been little research conducted in Canada on PLAR and its impact on learners and institutions. Much of the evidence of PLAR's efficacy is based on limited, anecdotal accounts on the experiences of individuals and specific projects.

The purpose of the Cross-Canada Study on PLAR is to elicit information on PLAR in Canada and to observe whether PLAR lowers the waterline on the "iceberg" by increasing recognition of informal learning. It is also the Study's purpose to examine what has happened in PLAR in Canadian colleges over the last several years. It is hoped that the information provided by this Study will assist institutions, governments, adult learners and workplaces with their decision-making on the funding, development, delivery, use and evaluation of new and existing PLAR services.

It is the intention of the Cross-Canada Study partners to assist others to conduct their own research into PLAR by making the Study's database and computer-based data collection tool available for non-profit purposes to any post-secondary organization in Canada. At the time of printing this report, discussions with a number of potential "homes" for the database and the data collection tool were in progress.

Funded by Human Resources Development Canada, the Study has undertaken an approach similar to case study research to investigate PLAR activities at the seven partner institutions from 1993/94 to 1997/98. Through a combination of statistical data collection, analysis and focus groups, the project has gathered extensive information: characteristics of PLAR learners, PLAR activities, the impact of the PLAR experience from the learners' and institutions' perspectives, and the costs of PLAR. Observations are made on how PLAR learners compare with traditional students in post-secondary programs in relation to demographics and course activity.

PHASE ONE

The Study originated in 1996 when the independent PLAR consultant met with three community college PLAR Facilitators from Ontario to discuss the possibility of a research study into the costs of PLAR in that province. The consultant identified the colleges on the basis of their records as institutions active in PLAR, the reputations of the PLAR Facilitators as experienced professionals committed to PLAR and adult learning and the historical background of the Facilitators who had already worked together over the previous four years. Following initial discussions, the scope of the project was expanded to include research into the demographics of PLAR learners and their course and program activities. An academic advisor was invited to assist in designing and implementing the methodologies and evaluating the results. A senior faculty member at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto agreed to assist in the research.

Preliminary inquiries were made with Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) regarding possible funding. In light of PLAR's capacity to ease transitions from workplaces to learning opportunities that enhance employability and in consideration of HRDC's mandate to facilitate pan-Canadian research in areas that increase access to learning programs that improve access to the labour market, HRDC's response was one of encouragement.

This led to an expansion of the participants of the project to include institutions from other provinces. Selection of the additional institutions was based on consideration of their reputations as active participants in PLAR, their regional representation and the experience of their PLAR Facilitators.

Phase One was designated as the project planning phase and included:

- a review of literature and its implications for further Study
- initial research methodology including a) research objectives, b) common terminology, c) research guidelines and d) communication mechanisms
- formal commitment of participating institutions to the Study
- recruitment of an advisory committee for Phase Two
- submission of Phase One Report and a proposed Phase Two budget to HRDC

REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STUDY

The researchers in the Cross-Canada Study were able to locate only one published research study on PLAR learners, activities or costs in Canada. This literature review is brief, focussing primarily on a few reports from Canada and the United States although a small number of reports from Great Britain were reviewed.

Boe and Whittaker (1992) examined assessment fee structures and levels, methods of PLAR assessment, cost of assessment, PLAR structures and activities, and assessor remuneration at over 300 institutions across the United States. It reveals a wide range of approaches to assessment fees. It also describes the relationship between fee structures and assessment methods. The Cross-Canada Study on PLAR also contains detailed information on institutional fee structures, and has replicated some of the Institutional Survey's questions about methods of assessment and levels of fees for comparative analysis. Noteworthy features of the Boe and Whittaker report are the number and range of future research questions it raises.

Reidel (1982) addresses PLAR learner success in a 1982 study by Coastline Community College in California. Using an experimental group and a control group, the study compared the academic achievement levels of PLAR students to those of students in the College's general population. Grade point average and program completion rates were used as indicators. Among the results of the study were conclusions that the academic achievement levels of students who had received PLAR were not notably different from those students who did not receive PLAR. Program completion rates among PLAR students were considerably higher than among regular students (1:3 to 1:24). The study's stated assumption that the PLAR learners would be older adults was also corroborated (average age group – 39 yrs. to 43 yrs.). The costs of achieving credits through PLAR were found to be dramatically less than through traditional classroom activities.

The Coastline Community College study and the Cross-Canada Study are similar in that they both report on methods of assessment, PLAR costs and the academic achievements of PLAR learners compared with traditional students. The Cross-Canada Study differs from the California study by providing information on the details of the research methodology so that the Study may be replicated by other institutions. The Cross-Canada Study also differs from the California study in methodology by comparing traditional students in the same programs as the PLAR learners, rather than traditional students from the College's general population.

The issue of PLAR student success is important to address if governments and educational institutions are to continue to support PLAR in Canada. The significance of such data is evidenced by Hoffman, Lemaster and Flicker (1996) in a study on the effectiveness of an experiential learning program in supporting efficient learning for adults at the University of Maryland, University College (UMUC). This study examines the effects of the portfolio development course (EXCEL) and subsequent granting of credit through PLA, on the students' overall academic achievements. In particular, the study investigates a possible correlation between the completion of the EXCEL program and student retention. Student retention was indicated by grade point averages, the number of credits taken and number of graduates. The report observed that students who completed the EXCEL program, particularly those who took the portfolio course as their first course at the institution, "tend to graduate faster, have a higher percentage of graduates, achieve higher grade-point averages and earn more credits than students in the general population".

The PLAR Cross-Canada Study has replicated the UMUC study's examination of student characteristics (gender, age). It extends the examination to provide concrete data on the academic experience of PLAR learners including graduation rates, pass/fail rates, grades, the number of courses taken and financial costs to PLAR learners.

Conclusion

Although the literature is generally consistent in its support for PLAR learners as "successful" students, the breadths of the studies to date are limited and the methodologies are not fully reported. The data collected represent a start in efforts to link institutional practices with PLAR learner success and provides a resource for future studies, but the depth of analysis may not provide sufficient information to influence PLAR design or administrative practices. The Cross-Canada Study on PLAR builds on these studies and improves the quantity and quality of information on which student, institution and government decision-makers can rely.

INITIAL RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

An approach similar to procedures used in case studies, was selected for the collection and analysis of PLAR data for several reasons. Common information at all seven sites could be collected while at the same time, each institution's unique features could be accommodated. Study partners were aware that lack of consistency in provincial funding arrangements, college management information systems and the institutions' organizational structures and PLAR policies and practices meant that many of the findings would be descriptive and would need to be presented within context.

Six research objectives were established for the Study. They were to:

- create a comprehensive database of PLAR learners and traditional students over a 5-year period
- identify characteristics of PLAR learners
- identify and analyze PLAR activities at partner institutions
- analyze the effects of PLAR on learners and partner institutions
- assess the costs of courses/credits achieved through PLAR
- compare the costs of courses/credits produced through PLAR with the cost of courses/credits produced through traditional course delivery

The five-year period of 1993/94 to 1997/98 was selected as the Study period.

Throughout Phase One of the Study, the partners explored within their own institutions, the types of information they would be able to obtain on PLAR learners to meet the above-stated objectives. Since this was the first study of its kind in Canada, the type, extent, and retrievability of existing data were unknown.

Because education and training in Canada are primarily under provincial jurisdiction, the institutional partners had different policies, procedures and practices, student registration procedures, academic program designs, credential award systems, student record and information systems and financial accounting procedures. The establishment of key definitions was one of the first tasks undertaken and was critical to the success of the project.

The first important definition the partners established was PLAR. The definition had to be consistent with the generally accepted international concept of recognizing learning acquired outside the classroom for academic credit. It had to be compatible with the practices of the project's partner institutions and it also had to imbed principles that would ensure quality of process. The task at arriving at a unanimous definition of PLAR did not turn out to be difficult, largely because most Canadian institutions developed their PLAR processes by learning from one another and they are linked by several common threads.

The following key definitions were used.

Prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR). Prior learning assessment and recognition is a process of identifying and measuring learning acquired outside known public educational institutions for recognition through academic credit.

Sharon (1983, p. 6) notes that the main purposes of PLAR in educational settings are to translate learning into credit, assist in the placement of students into appropriate program levels and facilitate career development.

PLAR learner. A PLAR learner is an individual who had at least one prior learning assessment.

Traditional student (TRAD). A traditional student is an individual enrolled in a college course or program who has not had a prior learning assessment. At College Ahuntsic, only data on full-time traditional students were collected.

A Glossary of Terms was drafted and amended throughout Phase One of the project (see Appendix A).

c. Research Guidelines

The partners unanimously agreed that only prior learning assessments recorded officially as PLAR by the institutions would be included in the Study. Research guidelines and templates were prepared to assist partners to organize their work and collect accurate and consistent data. A workplan for Phase Two was developed.

Research activities were divided into six tasks and guidelines were prepared on:

- institutional workplans
- institutional profiles
- focus groups
- data collection on PLAR learners
- data collection on traditional students
- cost analysis

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Communication Mechanisms

To facilitate economical communication among the partners, the project team accessed a computer conferencing service through the NODE, a distance education communications system located at the University of Western Ontario. Discussions on every aspect of the Study were carried out electronically by the partners throughout the project.

During the early and mid-stages of the project, partners entered the conference regularly to present their views and engage in discussions on all posted items. The Co-ordinator moderated the discussion and collated the viewpoints of the partners in over 50 discussion items and hundreds of discussion entries. Later in the project, the use of the NODE diminished primarily because of the difficulty several partners experienced in accessing the site. E-mail replaced the NODE as the primary means of communication. Faxes and telephones were important elements of the partnership's low cost, pan-Canadian communications system.

FORMAL COMMITMENT OF PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS TO THE STUDY

Two initiatives were undertaken to ensure completion of the project.

A memorandum of understanding signed by all partner institutions committed them to the project activities outlined in the Phase One report and confirmed one of the institutions, Conestoga College, as manager of the finances of the Study (see Appendix B). For financial management purposes, the Study Co-ordinator was under contract to Conestoga College but in all other respects was a full partner in the project.

An authorship agreement was drafted and signed by all partners confirming agreement that the data collected during the Study was the property of the partners and that the report would be published under joint authorship of all eight partners (see Appendix C).

RECRUITMENT OF AN ADVISORY COMMITTEE

On the advice of Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC), the partners established an advisory committee to provide overall advice on the direction of the Study, the project budget and the decision-making process from February 1998 to the end of the project. Terms of reference for committee members were established and individuals whose knowledge and expertise were directly relevant to the Study and whose views on PLAR were respected and influential in Canada were invited to participate (see Appendix D).

The Phase One report was submitted to Human Resources Development Canada on January 30, 1998. The report was accepted by HRDC and a funding proposal for Phase Two was approved by HRDC in May, 1998. (The partners continued to work informally on the Study throughout the first five months of 1998 in anticipation of Phase Two approval by HRDC.)

PART TWO

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

Phase Two activities included finalization of the glossary, an institutional profile chart (1996/97) and a series of *Glance at Us Today* reports (1998/99).

The glossary ensures that collection and analysis of data are based on a common understanding of terms. The institutional profiles provide an instant snapshot of the organizational context of each institution's PLAR activities at the mid-point of the Study (see Appendix E). *The Glance at Us Today* reports provide a bridge between the end of the study period and the time of publication by presenting PLAR-related activities at each institution since 1997/98. They will be particularly useful to those who wish to use the data from the Study but need to know if important changes have taken place at the institutions since the end of the study period (see Appendix F).

LEARNER/STUDENT DATA COLLECTION

A preliminary list of data collection items and potential questions established in Phase One became the basis for a data collection tool created for the Study using Microsoft Access '97 software. The tool was designed to collect information on PLAR learners and traditional students, and all their courses and programs. Guidelines were prepared to assist the institutional partners to pilot the data collection tool. Using ten PLAR learners and traditional students the partners identified potential design and transmission problems.

Based on the pilot results the tool was revised to facilitate both manual data entry and electronic downloading. Each method of data collection had its complications. The partners using electronic downloading were attempting to collect specific data from information systems that were designed for other purposes. Extracting valid and reliable information required by the Study was labour-intensive. The partners using manual data collection were required to review hundreds of hard copy files and access several independent information systems that could not be connected to the Access software either due to technological incompatibility or lack of available expertise. Every piece of data had to be entered manually into the data collection tool. The data collection fields included in the tool are listed in Appendix G.

Several features of the data collection tool were devised to ensure validation and integrity of the data. Efforts to ensure, as far as possible, the reliability of the data included the design of the PLAR data collection tool. Once the data were collected and combined into the PLAR data repository, additional steps were taken to rectify identifiable errors. A report on development of the data collection tool and the steps taken to ensure data integrity was prepared for the Co-ordinator by the digital data specialist.

a. PLAR Learner Data Collection

Data were first collected on PLAR learners, the courses and programs in which they had PLAR as well as the non-PLAR, traditional courses and programs in which they were enrolled. This research activity revealed many instances of PLAR that were not officially recorded at a number of institutions. One institutional partner for example discovered that an entire school within their institution was conducting what appeared to be PLAR but not recording it in order to avoid administrative red-tape and charging learners the assessment fee. These "PLAR" activities were not included in this Study for two reasons: there were no records only recollections, and it could not be determined if the assessments were conducted in accordance with college PLAR policy and procedures.

Additional PLAR learner data was collected by College Ahuntsic with respect to the assessment of military training programs for academic credit. Due to the high volume of learners, the 1996/97 academic year was selected for data collection.

The institutional partners obtained assistance from their information systems personnel in order to conduct data entry. In some cases, the Access software was specially purchased and training was required before the data collection tool could be adequately managed. Data were submitted to the Co-ordinator who reviewed them with the digital data specialist for inconsistencies, errors in data collection, coding and entry as well as omissions. Feedback was provided to each institution and revised versions of the databases were re-submitted to the Co-ordinator. In some cases, this exchange occurred several times until the database was as complete as possible.

b. Traditional Student Data Collection

The purpose of collecting data on traditional students was to facilitate comparisons with PLAR learners in the same programs. To review the list of traditional student programs collected see Appendix H.

The partners established criteria on which to base the size of the sample populations of traditional students. Again, workload was a major determining factor. Information on all courses and programs taken by the selected traditional students were collected (with one exception noted below). Partners that collected this data manually (Red River College, College Ahuntsic, Conestoga College and College of the North Atlantic) restricted collection to 50 traditional students per program. The institutions that could electronically download much of their data (Douglas College, Fanshawe College) collected data on sample populations of approximately 100 traditional students per program. One institution (Mohawk College) was able to electronically collect data on all of their traditional students but limited the number of programs. It is the view of the Study partners that the traditional student sample populations of 50 and 100 students adequately represent the traditional student populations and the larger population data collected by Mohawk College enrich the results. During the data analysis, steps were taken to minimize the distortion created by the large Mohawk population by averaging quantitative analysis results for each institution before combining them to obtain national results.

A central repository was established into which all institutional partners' data were downloaded. The 72 mega-byte repository is completely free of learner and student identifiers. Only institutions maintained data on student numbers so that appropriately authorized personnel could verify records.

For details on data collection procedures see Appendix I.

c. Documentation and Human Resources

The partners shared design, data collection and analysis plans with the Advisory Committee and the project academic advisor. The partners also accessed institutional documentation to obtain statistical information on PLAR policies and practices, financial policies and government reporting requirements. The partners themselves share years of experience in all aspects of PLAR and provided expertise in data analysis. Other institutional authorities in finance, information systems, focus group dynamics and data analysis were also used as resources throughout data collection and analysis. These resources are referenced throughout this report.

d. Data Verification Procedures

During the data collection process the partners met twice to discuss the status of their progress as well as the guidelines used to collect data. The partners discussed and resolved issues related to all aspects of the Study. Dozens of queries and reports prepared by the Co-ordinator and digital data specialist were analyzed collectively by the partners. Errors, inconsistencies and omissions were identified and actions to resolve data problems were devised.

During the data collection process the partners also held two joint meetings with the advisory committee. The partners reported on the progress of the Study and obtained advice regarding the analysis and reporting of PLAR and traditional student data and the structure of the final report.

LEARNER/STUDENT DATA ANALYSIS

Based on a review of the data items collected, a discussion document on a framework for analysis was prepared. and included the four areas of study: characteristics of PLAR learners, PLAR activities, impact of the PLAR experience from the learners and institutions' perspectives and the cost of PLAR.

A series of 141 simple, table and cross-tab queries were prepared to obtain findings and identify data errors. Several thousand errors were found and corrected by obtaining clarification and corrections from the partner institutions. Following corrections, the queries were re-run and results were cross-referenced and analyzed to ensure accuracy.

Three types of quantitative analysis are conducted in this report:

- descriptive analysis involving descriptive data findings
- comparative analysis involving findings related to two or more sets of data
- interpretive analysis involving the integration of several data findings.

Two levels of activity are examined: the national and institutional levels. The analysis has been conducted in relation to two time frames: annual and the five-year study period.

Preliminary analysis was followed by a review of all data collection items of the highest priority items. An initial list of potential outcome statements on PLAR learners, traditional students and costs of PLAR were prepared. Over 100 queries were pared down to 34 tables and charts for the report.

The results of the quantitative analysis were then synthesized with the results of the focus group sessions (reported in Part Four) to form the basis of the report's conclusions and recommendations.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

RESULTS AND OBSERVATIONS

Caution should be exercised in any attempt to draw conclusions from cross-institutional comparisons. The historical development of PLAR at each institution has been unique resulting in a variety of approaches to PLAR in policy and implementation. These differences are reflected in the results of this Study but require further investigation before conclusions can be drawn regarding the efficacy of one approach over another.

The charts and tables in this report use acronyms to identify PLAR learners and traditional students (TRAD). Participants are identified by the first letter of their institution followed by PLAR or TRAD depending on whether they are PLAR learners or traditional students (e.g. APLAR represents a PLAR learner at College Ahuntsic).

Statistical data on PLAR relate to:

- Number of PLAR learners
- Gender
- Age
- Student status
- Tuition payments
- PLAR orientation
- Portfolio development
- Number of PLAR assessments
- Timing of assessments
- Methods of assessment
- Program activity
- Discipline activity
- PLAR learner success

STUDY PARTICIPANTS

This report examines the academic activity of 3,519 institutionally recorded PLAR learners from 1993/94 to 1997/98 (partial year for two institutions). The learners had 7,912 prior learning assessments in over 1,400 courses. Anecdotal evidence indicates that an additional number of PLAR assessments were conducted at most of the partner institutions but lack of documentation prevented inclusion in the Study. PLAR learners also took 39,997 traditional courses in 362 programs in nine disciplines. Data on a sampling of 11,785 traditional students in 58 programs were also collected for the purpose of comparison with PLAR learners. The records of 237,115 courses taken by traditional students were compiled. Table 1 shows the total number of PLAR learner enrolments by year. (Not: the totals on this chart exceed the number of actual learners because the numbers were calculated annually and each learner was counted once in each year in which they had an assessment.)

TABLE 1.3

Total Number of PLAR Learner and TRAD Student Enrolments by Year

Institution	1993/94	1994/95	1995/96	1996/97	1997/98	All Yrs
PLAR						
Ahuntsic	95	124	153	144	54	**570**
Conestoga	71	125	160	152	112	**620**
Douglas	90	144	267	274	208	**983**
Fanshawe	121	192	232	198	209	**952**
Mohawk	620	687	687	604	353	**2951**
North Atlantic	39	28	39	59	38	**203**
Red River	325	330	332	321	225	**1533**
Totals for PLAR	**1361**	**1630**	**1870**	**1752**	**1199**	**7812**
TRAD						
Ahuntsic	72	101	92	54	46	**365**
Conestoga	38	95	148	185	189	**665**
Douglas	541	650	575	530	454	**2750**
Fanshawe	415	404	452	435	416	**2122**
Mohawk	3899	4534	4624	4219	3525	**20801**
North Atlantic	1	30	38	38	39	**146**
Red River	82	91	96	66	33	**368**
Totals for TRAD	**5048**	**5905**	**6025**	**5527**	**4702**	**27207**

Note: 1997/98 for Mohawk College and Red River College are based on partial year statistics. Total enrolments exceed the total number of learners and students because individua

Observations

Over the five-year study period, the number of PLAR learners varied at each institution. The total number of learners was low given the size of the institutions' general populations.

The under-utilization of PLAR was anticipated by the institutional partners and may be due to several factors. The study period was in a developmental phase for PLAR at several of the institutions. Awareness among faculty and students was limited and activity was often conducted on a pilot project basis in the first years of implementation. The fact that College Ahuntsic, Mohawk College and Red River College had been conducting assessments since the 1980's appears to be reflected in the higher levels of PLAR activity at those institutions even though they differed considerably in size and range of available programs (see Institutional Profiles - Appendix E). Note also only partial data was available for Mohawk College and Red River College for 1997/98. Although College of the North Atlantic commenced PLAR in 1993/94, major re-structuring activities of the Newfoundland college system in 1997/98 impaired the partners ability to accurately document the number of learners.

The extent to which PLAR developed during the study period was also affected by the extent of targeted government funding received. At Douglas College for example, PLAR was activated as a result of special ongoing provincial government grants in 1995/96 as was the case at Conestoga College and Fanshawe College in 1993/94. However institutional concerns about the levels and temporary nature of the funding may also have affected the rate of PLAR development at these same institutions. Evidence from Conestoga College, Fanshawe College and Mohawk College indicates that low financial support impaired PLAR development at their institutions. The low number of PLAR learners is of major concern to the partners and should continued to be monitored in the coming years.

An additional factor affecting the number of reported PLAR learners was the extent to which institutions recorded assessments. During the Study, partners' research revealed instances of PLAR activity without records. The actual number of unrecorded assessments is unknown.

CHARACTERISTICS OF PLAR LEARNERS

Gender

Prevailing views on the gender of PLAR learners are that most PLAR learners are female. It was a goal of this Study to determine whether these preconceptions were accurate. The results indicate that **in total, 65% of all PLAR learners were female and 35% were male. At every institution but one, female PLAR learners were in the majority**. Table 2 presents a gender breakdown of PLAR learners at each institution and nationally.

TABLE 2

Gender Breakdown of PLAR Learners by Institution

Institution	Fem	Male	N/A	Total	% Fem	% Male	% N/A
Ahuntsic	96	219	0	315	30.5%	69.5%	0.0%
Conestoga	139	83	0	222	62.6%	37.4%	0.0%
Douglas	339	116	3	458	74.0%	25.3%	0.7%
Fanshawe	264	95	2	361	73.1%	26.3%	0.6%
Mohawk	906	268	0	1174	77.2%	22.8%	0.0%
North Atlantic	61	38	0	99	61.6%	38.4%	0.0%
Red River	681	209	0	890	76.5%	23.5%	0.0%
Totals for PLAR	**2486**	**1028**	**5**	**3519**	**65.1%**	**34.7%**	**0.2%**

Note: Larger institutions have more data and their effect is a disproportionate skewing of the National values. To make these values more representative they are calculated by averaging the percents for the (7) institutions thereby giving all of them an equal "weight".

Observations

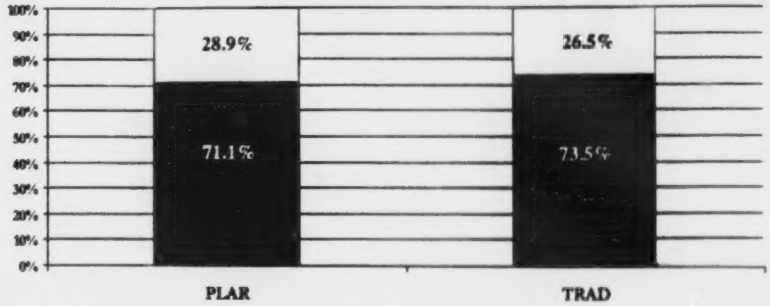
A high female population among PLAR learners was relatively consistent across most of the institutions. Only College Ahuntsic demonstrated a unique gender distribution with only 31% females (compared to its general population of 51% female). The generally high female population differs from that of the Canadian general college population (51% female) and from the general populations of the partner institutions that ranged from 62% female at Douglas College to 44% female at Red River College). It also differs from the findings of Hoffman in *The Effectiveness of the EXCEL Program in Supporting Efficient Learning for Adults Study* (51% female PLAR learners).

Based on their knowledge of PLAR activity in their institutions, the partners believe that the high percentage of female PLAR learners at most of the institutions is largely due to the high use of PLAR in programs related to occupations with traditionally high concentrations of female workers. This perspective is supported by the study finding that the genders of PLAR learners in programs for which the Study collected traditional student samples, closely resembled the gender distribution of the traditional students (71% female PLAR learners and 74% traditional students). See Chart 1.

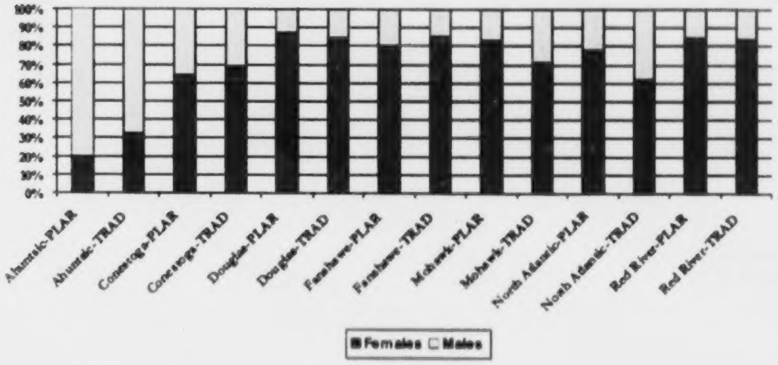
CHART 1

Gender breakdown of PLAR Learners and TRAD Students in the Same Programs

National



All Institutions



Note: Traditional student data is based on a sampling of students.

College Ahuntsic reports that the programs in which there were the most PLAR assessments were those related to an occupation that traditionally had high concentrations of male workers (Techniques Ambulancieres) who needed to obtain certification following a change in job requirements. College Ahuntsic's experience suggests that PLAR can be a marketing tool to attract workers to obtain additional training for employment or occupational certification.

The establishment of additional reasons for the gender distribution of PLAR learners requires further research.

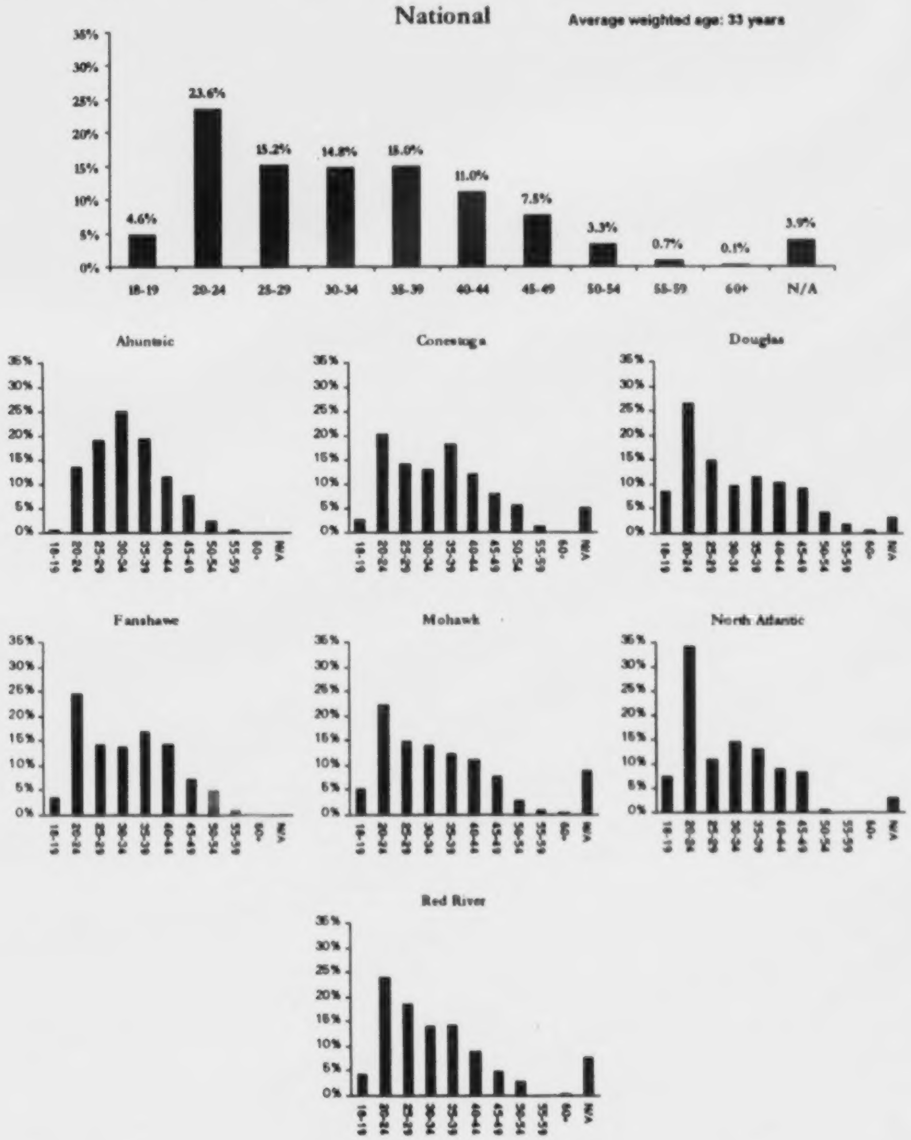
Age of PLAR Learners

An important purpose of PLAR is to help increase access to education and training by recognizing learning previously acquired by mature adults. One of the goals of the Study was to determine whether existing perceptions that PLAR learners are mature adults were accurate. The ages of all PLAR learners were determined and grouped into 5-year age categories.

The results indicate that **nationally, 52% of PLAR learners were over 30 years of age. Approximately 38 % were over the age of 35 years and 12% were over the age of 45 years. Chart 2 shows that age distribution varied to some extent by institution. The overall average age of PLAR learners was 33 years compared to 27 years for traditional students.** Table 3 presents the same information in table format.

CHART 2

Age Distribution of PLAR Learners by Institution



Note: Larger institutions have more data and their effect is a disproportionate skewing of the National Percent values. To make these values more representative they are calculated by averaging the percents for the (7) institutions thereby giving all of them an equal "weight".

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

TABLE 3

Age Distribution of PLAR Learners by Institution

	Age Categories (Percents and Number of Students)										
	18-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60+	N/A
Ahuntsic	0.7%	13.5%	19.1%	25.1%	19.3%	11.6%	7.5%	2.5%	0.7%	0.0%	0.0%
	4	77	109	143	110	66	43	14	4	0	0
Conestoga	2.7%	20.3%	14.2%	12.9%	18.2%	12.1%	7.9%	5.5%	1.1%	0.0%	5.0%
	17	126	88	80	113	75	49	34	7	0	31
Douglas	8.6%	26.3%	14.9%	9.8%	11.5%	10.4%	9.2%	4.2%	1.6%	0.5%	3.1%
	85	259	146	96	113	102	90	41	16	5	30
Fanshawe	3.4%	24.6%	14.3%	13.8%	16.9%	14.3%	7.1%	4.9%	0.7%	0.0%	0.0%
	32	234	136	131	161	136	68	47	7	0	0
Mohawk	5.2%	22.3%	14.8%	13.9%	12.1%	11.2%	7.7%	2.8%	0.8%	0.3%	8.8%
	154	658	438	411	357	330	226	84	25	9	259
North Atlantic	7.4%	34.0%	10.8%	14.3%	12.8%	8.9%	8.4%	0.5%	0.0%	0.0%	3.0%
	15	69	22	29	26	18	17	1	0	0	6
Red River	4.3%	23.9%	18.6%	14.0%	14.4%	8.9%	4.9%	2.9%	0.1%	0.2%	7.8%
	66	366	285	215	220	137	75	45	2	3	119
National	4.6%	23.6%	15.2%	14.8%	15.0%	11.0%	7.5%	3.3%	0.7%	0.1%	3.9%
	373	1789	1224	1105	1100	864	568	266	61	17	445

Note: The ages of PLAR learners were determined by establishing the sum of their age for every year in which they had PLAR and taking the average. The national average age of PLAR learners was determined by totaling the average age of learners at each institution and dividing it by the number of institutions thereby giving all institutions an equal "weight".

Observations

Analysis confirms existing perceptions that most PLAR learners were mature adults. This finding is consistent at every institution and can be attributed in part to the fact that PLAR learners have had more time than younger adults to acquire knowledge and skills through work and life experience and are interested in completing their training programs with maximum efficiency.

An unexpected result of the data analysis is that the largest single age category, representing almost 24% of PLAR learners, was the 20 – 24 years age range. Based on their experience the partners believe that high PLAR activity among these younger learners may be due to a variety of factors that apply differently at each institution. They include,

- The need to obtain credit for learning recently acquired in university programs not covered by credit transfer agreements
- Efforts to make up for previously failed courses they do not wish to repeat
- A higher level of awareness of PLAR among PLAR learners who are full-time students due to more frequent contact with college services

One exception to this phenomenon is College Ahuntsic in which the single most active age category was 30 – 34 years. This was due to a high number of learners from the Techniques Ambulancieres program who had worked many years in their field and were required by a change in government regulation to obtain occupational certification.

When the ages of PLAR learners are compared to those of traditional students in the same programs, there appears a much more even distribution of age groupings at College Ahuntsic, Conestoga College and Douglas College. The distribution among the other institutions remained relatively unchanged. **Table 4** provides a comparison of the age distribution of PLAR learners to that of traditional students in the same programs. The use of PLAR by mature learners suggests that marketing activities to attract students over the age of 30 years may increase PLAR activity levels.

TABLE 4

Comparison of Age Categories of PLAR Learners and TRAD Students in the Same Programs

		Age Categories										
		18-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60+	N/A
Ahuntsic	PLAR	1.0%	20.7%	20.2%	26.4%	15.0%	6.7%	6.7%	3.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
	TRAD	11.6%	37.6%	19.4%	16.5%	9.5%	3.7%	0.4%	0.8%	0.4%	0.0%	0.0%
Conestoga	PLAR	2.4%	11.2%	15.9%	17.9%	23.9%	8.4%	8.8%	4.8%	2.4%	0.0%	4.4%
	TRAD	18.5%	38.7%	9.6%	8.5%	7.3%	7.0%	4.0%	1.4%	0.5%	0.0%	4.5%
Douglas	PLAR	2.4%	11.6%	11.3%	12.9%	19.8%	14.5%	15.0%	7.7%	3.4%	1.1%	0.3%
	TRAD	9.5%	38.4%	15.7%	11.8%	8.8%	7.4%	5.0%	2.4%	0.7%	0.3%	0.2%
Fanshawe	PLAR	4.0%	34.1%	14.0%	13.1%	13.1%	12.2%	5.5%	2.7%	1.2%	0.0%	0.0%
	TRAD	23.1%	53.6%	10.8%	5.3%	3.7%	2.2%	0.5%	0.5%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%
Mohawk	PLAR	8.2%	26.5%	15.2%	13.9%	10.7%	9.9%	6.4%	1.9%	0.3%	0.1%	6.9%
	TRAD	16.5%	45.1%	11.4%	7.6%	6.9%	4.5%	3.2%	1.0%	0.5%	0.2%	3.1%
North Atlantic	PLAR	4.5%	24.1%	9.8%	15.0%	18.8%	11.3%	12.8%	0.8%	0.0%	0.0%	3.0%
	TRAD	11.0%	48.6%	16.4%	6.2%	4.8%	6.2%	2.1%	0.7%	0.7%	0.0%	3.4%
Red River	PLAR	3.8%	25.8%	17.6%	12.8%	14.0%	8.9%	4.8%	2.2%	0.2%	0.3%	9.7%
	TRAD	13.0%	39.1%	13.9%	9.8%	12.8%	5.4%	2.7%	1.4%	0.3%	0.0%	1.6%

Note: Large institutions have more data and their effect is a disproportionate skewing of the National Percent values. To make these values more representative they are calculated by averaging the percents for the (7) institutions thereby giving all of them an equal "weight". Traditional student data is based on a sampling of students.

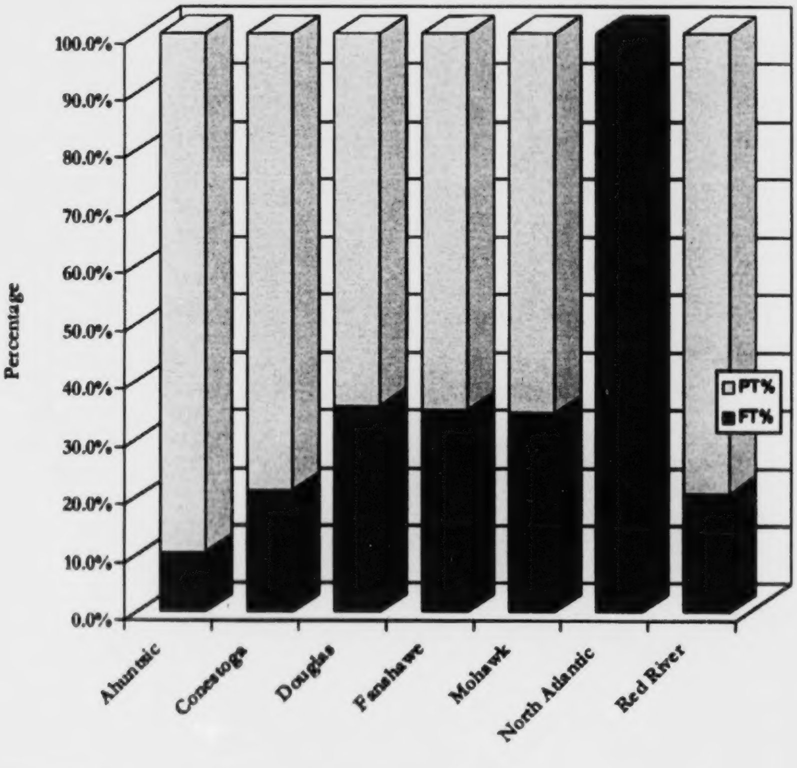
Student Status

The status of PLAR learners as non-student, part-time or full-time student provides information on PLAR learners' programming needs (see Glossary for definition of student status).

In total, 63% of PLAR learners were part-time students and 37% were full-time students at the time of their prior learning assessments. Chart 3 presents the status of PLAR students at each institution. It reveals that with the exception of learners at two colleges, the distribution of part-time to full-time status was relatively consistent. The exceptions, College of the North Atlantic had PLAR assessments by only full-time students. College Ahuntsic had assessments nearly exclusively by part-time students. A comparison of the student status of PLAR learners and traditional students in the same programs also revealed that 62% of PLAR learners were part-time compared to 24% of traditional students (see Chart 4).

CHART 3

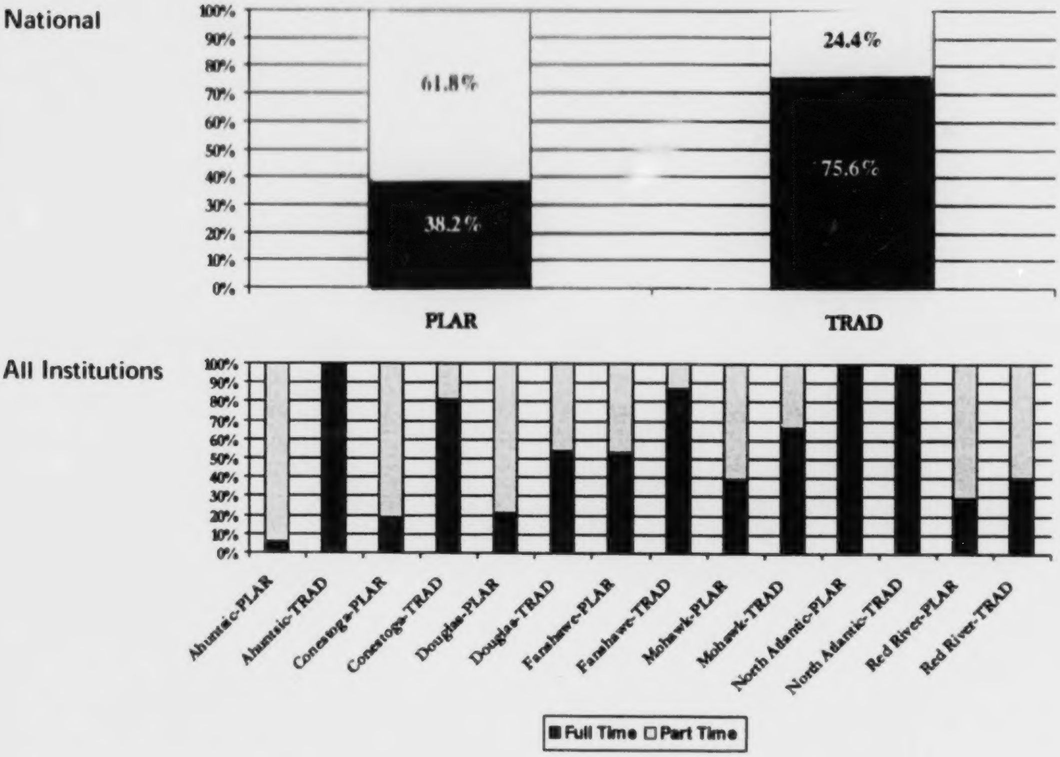
Status of PLAR Learners at Each Institution



Note: See Glossary for definitions of full-time and part-time.

CHART 4

Student Status of PLAR Learners and TRAD Students in the Same Programs

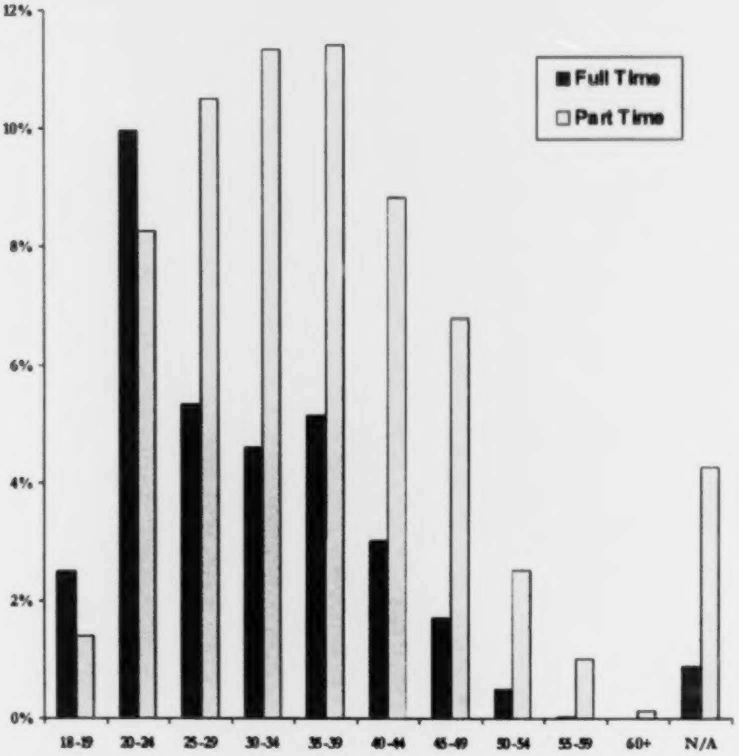


Note: The total number of students in the student status findings exceeds the total number of PLAR learners and students were both full-time and part-time students either concurrently in different or sequentially during the five-year study period The Traditional student data is based on a sampling of students.

Further investigation of student status by age category revealed that approximately 8% of PLAR learners from 20 - 24 years of age were part-time students compared to 5% of traditional students (not shown). Approximately 42% of PLAR learners over the age of 30 years were part-time students (see Chart 5).

CHART 5

Student Status by Age Category



Note: Larger institutions have more data and their effect is a disproportionate skewing of the National Percent values. To make these values more representative they are calculated by averaging the percents for the (7) institutions thereby giving all of them an equal "weight".

Observations

There are likely several factors contributing to the low proportion of mature PLAR learners who were full-time students, including government and institutional tuition policies and program delivery structures. At several of the institutions, successful PLAR assessments can reduce full-time students' status to part-time thereby eliminating students' continuing eligibility for government funded financial assistance. The rigid schedules of full-time programming are difficult for mature adults to accommodate along with work and family responsibilities and often do not result in shortened program time. This is a problem not just for PLAR learners but part-time adult students in general.

One factor presenting a disincentive to taking full-time programs as a part-time student was raised during the focus groups with PLAR learners who reported the difficulty they experienced in completing programs that do not offer all of their courses on a part-time basis. *"I know I'll probably never be able to finish the program because I'm not able to take time off work… I have got in by begging at the door… 'Please take me'. It's kind of pathetic and you can't always get in that way".*

Others felt as part-time students that PLAR was of particular value in shortening their programs, *"[without PLAR] it would have taken me another two years".*

Double Payments by Learners

There are financial disincentives to PLAR at some institutions that require full-time students to pay PLAR assessment fees in addition to tuition for the courses in which they are being assessed. This is particularly true when full-time students pay by program fee rather than individuals course fees. Table 5 presents the number of learners at six institutions who paid both tuition and assessment fees. Complete date was not available from two institutions (Mohawk College, Red River College).

TABLE 5

Number and Percentage of Full Time PLAR Learners who Paid both Tuition and an Assessment Fee for the Same Course

Institution	All PLAR	PLAR that Paid Tuition and Assessment Fee	
		Number	Percent
Ahuntsic	30	0	0.0%
Conestoga	21	21	100.0%
Douglas	151	0	0.0%
Fanshawe	102	102	100.0%
Mohawk	359	33	9.2%
North Atlantic	93	32	34.4%
Red River	176	5	2.8%
National	**932**	**193**	**35.2%**

Note: Larger institutions have more data and their effect is a disproportionate skewing of the National Percent values. To make these values more representative they are calculated by averaging the percents for the (7) institutions thereby giving all of them an equal "weight". Mohawk College and Red River College report that their data is incomplete.

Observations

The evidence on double payments of tuition and assessment fees is far from complete. Some of the institutions have no formal means of tracking this activity. However, the data combined with the knowledge of the partners on activities in their institutions indicate that full-time students pursuing PLAR sometimes end up paying tuition and assessment fees for the same course. This data was supplemented by statements made by PLAR learners and assessors in the focus groups. Although at some institutions double fees were appropriate where learners undertook PLAR and then took another course to "fast track" their program, this was not always the case and learners were not reimbursed for their double payments. Double payments occurred at four of the institutions (Conestoga College, Fanshawe College, Mohawk College and Red River College).

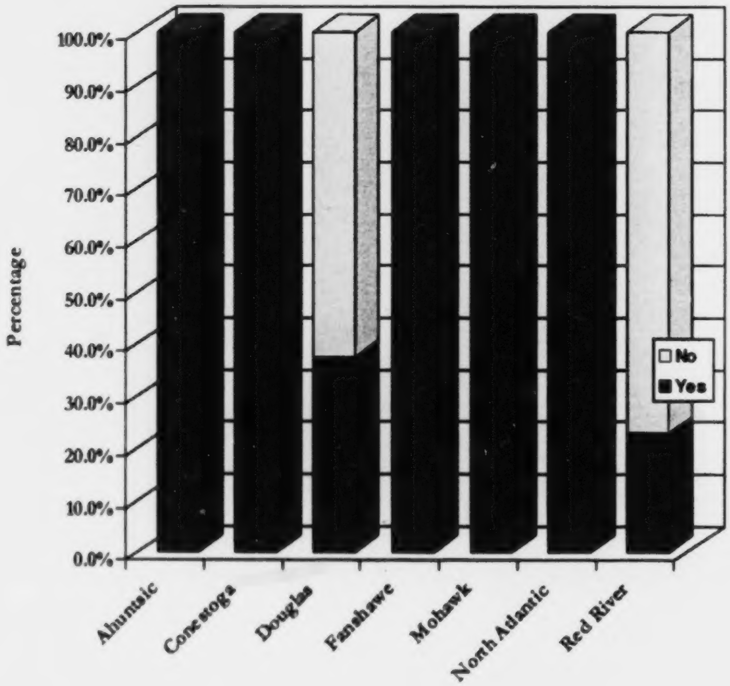
PLAR Orientation

PLAR orientations are conducted by many institutions as a means to provide introductory information on PLAR to all interested persons. Group sessions are often held in the evening and on weekends at pre-scheduled intervals. Individual interviews can be scheduled at some institutions and information packages are readily available at most colleges.

All seven institutions had PLAR orientation policies and practices. Five institutions reported that they provided orientation to all PLAR learners and two indicated that a proportion of their learners were oriented, depending on their need, and the extent to which PLAR had been successfully integrated into program operations. Data analysis indicates that **a total of 72% of PLAR learners received orientation to PLAR** (see Chart 6).

CHART 6

Percentages of PLAR Learners Who Received Orientation to PLAR



Observations

Correlation between PLAR orientation and PLAR learner success could not be investigated in detail as there are too many variables in addition to PLAR orientation that determine learner success. However, evidence on PLAR learner grades at each institution do not appear to differ significantly suggesting that orientation may not be a determining factor for success among learners who go on to do assessments.

Most of the institutions reported that general PLAR information is readily available through college publications and/or staff in departments such as admissions or counselling.

Nevertheless, when the adult learners in the Study focus groups were asked to comment on what would improve PLAR services at their institutions a common response was that general information about PLAR and specifics about the assessment process should be more available to learners. Learners felt that the many benefits of the process were not well known among students and that the information that was available was sometimes inconsistent and confusing, particularly with respect to assessment practices and fees.

"PLA isn't known to students that are applying [to the college]. How do they find out about it?'

Although the extent of this problem appeared to vary by institution, it may assist if PLAR orientations were incorporated into program orientations. Additional efforts could be made to market PLAR more widely so that learners are aware of orientation

"I didn't really know much about PLA at first, but once we had our orientation session on what it was, I thought it was going to be a great opportunity especially for someone like me who had experience in early childhood [education]".

The value of information on PLAR was also noted by some assessor focus group participants. Some participants expressed the need for more information.

"We need to improve the initial information package for candidates. It's very time consuming; not so much the assessment itself, but all the information you have to give out ahead of time".

"There are guidelines needed for all persons involved in PLAR. You need guidelines for students, guidelines for instructors, the managers, deadlines, etc. There has to be a formal structure".

Portfolio Development Course

A portfolio development course is generally a 39 – 45 hour course that helps students prepare a portfolio: an organized collection of materials that records and verifies learning achievements and relates them to educational requirements. The portfolio is not necessarily used for prior learning assessment. Some courses are designed to help learners document learning acquired through work and other life experiences solely for the purpose of career and personal development.

Portfolio development was offered at six of the seven institutions. The exception, College Ahuntsic reported that the course was offered in years past but it was considered by assessors and learners to be onerous as an assessment tool. It was more useful for career development. Of the six colleges offering portfolio development courses, four offered it as a credit course, one college offered it as a credit and non-credit course and one college offered it as a non-credit course only. At one institution, Douglas College, portfolio development was incorporated into a generic evidence preparation/PLAR advising course which in 1997/98 also incorporated a pilot project in distance advising.

Approximately 12% of PLAR learners took a portfolio development course and went on to use their portfolios for assessment. Approximately 66% of these learners took a credit portfolio course and 34% took a non-credit course. Within this group, participation ranged from 13 learners at Fanshawe College (4%) to 137 learners at Douglas College (37%). When the number of PLAR learners is compared to the number of portfolio assessments (1,368), it appears that additional learners completed portfolios without taking the course. Approximately 61% of all portfolio development were undertaken at Douglas and Red River College.

Observations

The Study confirms that the vast majority of learners did not take a portfolio development course.

The low use of the portfolio development course as a support tool for assessment may be due to the fact that most learners generally undertake assessment in one course at a time rather than a block of courses at one time as was an original purpose of the portfolio development course. It may also be the result of the type of portfolio required by the institutions. The views expressed by College Ahuntsic on the onerous nature of comprehensive portfolios for assessment, were echoed by the other institutions. In later years, a variety of processes for portfolio development were developed in response to these concerns and enrollments in the course did increase over the course of the Study. However, the evidence indicates continuing low levels of use at all institutions. At some colleges, there appears to be a need to provide portfolio development opportunities that are less onerous for learners.

Nevertheless, many of the PLAR learners participating in the focus groups who had taken a portfolio development course were enthusiastic about its value as a tool for self-assessment, reflection and personal goal-setting and as an aid in gaining confidence in their own prior learning.

One focus group moderator summarized learners' comments in this way, *"Those who took the portfolio development course reported it was an extremely helpful part of the PLAR process, and those who did not take it, wished that they had taken it."*

Not all learners' shared this view however: *"Now that I know the amount of work entailed in the development of a portfolio, I think I would have preferred just completing an exam for the courses I challenged"*

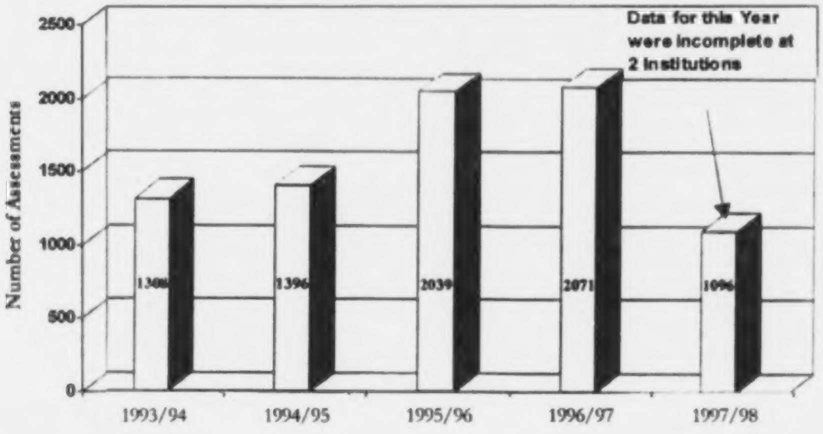
This data on portfolio is limited to learners who took a portfolio development course and proceeded to at least one prior learning assessment. It does not include learners who took portfolio development and did not proceed with an assessment during the duration of this Study.

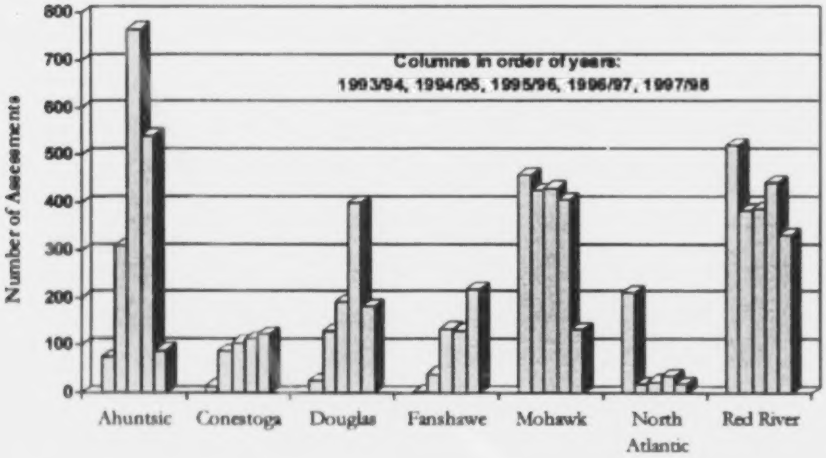
PLAR ASSESSMENTS

Partner institutions report recordings of 7,912 assessments over the five years in over 1,400 courses. Data on recorded assessments in the first four years of the Study are complete, with two noteworthy exceptions. College Ahuntsic and Douglas College do not keep records of unsuccessful or withdrawn assessments, and at two institutions only partial data was available for year five of the Study (Mohawk College, Red River College). Taking this into account, Chart 7 shows the total and annual number of assessments at each institution.

CHART 7

Number of PLAR Assessments by Year





42

Observations

Considering the length of the study period and the number of partner institutions, the total number of assessments conducted are low. As with the number of PLAR learners, these results were anticipated by several institutions and are likely due to a combination of factors varying by institution. They include incomplete record-keeping, lack of awareness of PLAR by the public, lack of cost-effective delivery structures, low priority-setting by government and institutions and inflexible program delivery systems that do not accommodate part-time learners. In addition, factors affecting the low number of PLAR learners apply equally to PLAR assessments including low demand, and the fact that most of the institutions were in the developmental stages of PLAR and focussed more on design and pilot projects than volume of assessments during the study period. The analysis does not confirm the expectations and concerns of some educators and policy makers in Canada who predicted that PLAR would result in high numbers of assessments.

With regard to the low numbers of assessments in 1997/98 due to partial data, two institutional partners noted that based on unconfirmed figures for the remainder of 1997/98, they expect the full year's data to be comparable to 1996/97. The low numbers in 1997/98 are also due to changes within some institutions' PLAR operations. College Ahuntsic for example, suspended the program that represented the most assessments annually (Techniques Ambulancieres). At Red River College, prior learning assessments in the Nursing program have dropped because of the introduction of a joint college-university Baccalaureate of Nursing program. The end of pilot projects may also have affected PLAR activity in some programs. It is difficult to speculate further without complete figures for 1997/98 and additional research. However, **the low number of assessments in 1997/98 at some institutions raises several important questions: what has been the effect of educational reform initiatives on PLAR? What has been the impact of the termination of government support funding after initial development? If PLAR assessments do diminish system-wide over time, what action should be taken, if any, and by whom?**

A sampling of frequent responses from focus group learners on the value of assessment included,

"I knew I could challenge for a lot of the courses in the program. That is what I did and it made a big difference, because now I only have a few courses left to do on a part-time basis and still work in the position of Computer Support Specialist".

"When your are working in a position where you do not have the paper credentials for that position, sometimes you feel that you are second-guessed by others. Well, this gives me proof…"

"It made a big difference of how long it was going to take to complete the whole program".

"It saved me from having to use holidays to work for free for somebody else." The moderator paraphrased some of one group's sentiments, "It was nice not to have to take time off work and lose wages or use vacation time to do a practicum".

Number of Assessments per Learner

The average number of assessments per learner was 2.3. A majority of learners had only one assessment and a total of 74.5% had two assessments or fewer (see Table 6).

The average PLAR learner acquired a noteworthy percentage of their courses through PLAR (16%). This suggests that for those who accessed the service, the impact was considerable. Data reported in focus groups reports confirmed pre-existing anecdotal evidence that **PLAR had the effect of:**

- **shortening the length of time required to complete programs on a part-time basis,**
- **reducing the amount of course workload,**
- **making program content more relevant and efficient,**
- **saving learners money**
- **increasing interest in and motivation to complete programs,**
- **improving self-confidence and self-esteem as learners and at work.**

Most striking about the data obtained from PLAR learners was the extent to which their involvement in PLAR was related to employment. The mature age of most PLAR learners likely has a bearing on this result. More detailed information on the perspectives of PLAR learners is provided in Part Four of this report.

TABLE 6

Number of Assessments per PLAR Learner

	Number of Assessment per PLAR Learner								
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	>8
Ahuntsic	29.1%	9.9%	7.9%	6.0%	4.0%	3.6%	1.7%	2.6%	35.1%
Conestoga	64.3%	18.1%	6.3%	5.4%	0.5%	0.9%	0.5%	0.5%	3.6%
Douglas	63.0%	15.0%	10.9%	2.7%	1.4%	1.6%	1.4%	0.7%	3.4%
Fanshawe	71.7%	18.1%	7.2%	1.4%	0.3%	0.6%	0.0%	0.8%	0.0%
Mohawk	71.8%	17.1%	6.1%	1.5%	0.9%	0.9%	0.1%	0.4%	1.2%
North Atlantic	55.9%	9.7%	4.3%	6.5%	3.2%	5.4%	1.1%	5.4%	8.6%
Red River	69.1%	12.2%	2.8%	3.1%	2.8%	3.3%	1.3%	2.0%	3.4%
National	60.7%	14.3%	6.5%	3.8%	1.9%	2.3%	0.8%	1.8%	7.9%

Note: Larger institutions have more data and their effect is a disproportionate skewing of the National Percent values. To make these values more representative they are calculated by averaging the percents for the (7) institutions thereby giving all of them an equal "weight".

Observations

Based on their experience, some of the institutional partners felt that the number of assessments per learner may be affected by the lack of availability of assessments in a timely way and by the course by course approach to assessment which some consider to be onerous.

When the data on distribution of assessments per learner (most had one assessment) is compared to the average number of assessments per learner (2.3), it appears that the results are skewed by College Ahuntsic where 50% of learners had more than four assessments and 35% had more than eight assessments. These high percentages were largely due to a major assessment project in which assessments were conducted in groups.

Nevertheless the findings suggest that:

- **Early concerns about learners acquiring large percentages of their credentials through PLAR thereby jeopardizing the legitimacy institutions' credentials, were unrealized.**

Timing of Assessments

In order to learn about when learners were accessing PLAR, the partners examined the timing of assessments in relation to the length of programs. This analysis was limited to learners who were only enrolled in one program during the study period and only in two and three-year programs. The evidence indicates that the vast majority of PLAR learners took their assessments early in their programs. **Approximately 95% of PLAR learners had their assessments in the first year of their program.**

Table 7 shows when learners enrolled in 2-year and 3-year programs took their assessments at each institution.

TABLE 7

Single Program PLAR Learners in 2 and 3 Year Programs: Comparison of Assessments Conducted in the First and Last Year of their Programs

Institution	First Year Percentage	Last Year Percentage
Ahuntsic	100.0%	0.0%
Conestoga	100.0%	0.0%
Douglas	97.6%	2.4%
Fanshawe	100.0%	0.0%
Mohawk	83.8%	16.7%
North Atlantic	96.3%	3.7%
Red River	89.3%	10.7%

Observations

In the early years of PLAR implementation, it was frequently expected that PLAR learners would complete their assessments when entering a program. This appears to be the case although this may vary by student status and some small variation show that flexibility in providing assessment opportunities when learners determine their own readiness, is a valuable element of PLAR services.

Data analysis involving program enrolment dates should be viewed conservatively due to the unreliability of program enrolment date data (see Limitations of Data Collection). In this instance, program enrolment was assumed to be at the start of a learner's program.

Methods of Assessment

The partner institutions were asked to identify the methods of PLAR assessment used at their institutions – challenge, demonstration, portfolio assessment, standardized test and workplace training program evaluation. An additional category, evaluation of military training programs was added to capture special assessment activities conducted by College Ahuntsic (see Glossary for definitions of each assessment method). Table 8 presents the number and percentage of assessments by method at six of the seven institutions. Table 8B presents the same information at one institution, (Fanshawe College) separately as it had records of assessment methods based only on "portfolio assessment" or "challenge", and "demostrations" were incorporated under "challenge".

Observations

All institutions used challenges and demonstrations as assessment methods. Only one institution did not use portfolio assessment (College Ahuntsic) although it was not the most common method used at any of the institutions. **The most common method of assessment among the partner institutions was challenge and the least common was workplace training program evaluation. College Ahuntsic was the only institution to report activity in the assessment of military training programs for credit.** Some assessments involved more than one method in order to cover the range of knowledge and skills presented by learners. Data on the number of methods used per assessment was collected by the Study partners but is unreliable due to record-keeping practices that tended to document only the primary method of assessment.

The predominance of challenge as the primary assessment method may be due to faculty's familiarity with challenge tools given their historically high use in traditional classrooms. It may also reflect a practice of using classroom evaluations as the basis for prior learning assessments, particularly in response to pressures to provide assessments in a timely manner. Given that PLAR is intended to facilitate the recognition of non-classroom learning, these results may indicate a need to further diversify the range of methods used to assess prior learning. Although the movement in some jurisdictions is toward greater flexibility in assessing learning in the classroom, the difficulties of implementing a flexible tool in an inflexible system may be at the root of PLAR's growing pains.

Over 99% of assessments conducted through evaluation of workplace training were reported at Red River College. Other institutions conducted workplace evaluation on a limited project basis but verifying documentation was not available. The overall low use of this method of PLAR throughout the five years highlights a potential area for concentrated development. The possibility of growth is supported by the experience of American post-secondary institutions reporting in the Boe and Whittaker (1992) survey that 64.8% of institutions accepted recommendations made by the American Council on Education with respect to workplace training evaluation. Based on many years of experience in PLAR, two partners noted that the future growth of PLAR, if any, will lie not in individual applications but in co-operative activities between workplaces and institutions. Recent developmental work in British Columbia with occupational bodies with respect to assessment for accreditation also supports this contention.

TABLE 8

Annual Number of PLAR Assessments by Method at Six Institutions

Course	Assessment Methods (Percent and Number)					
Completion Date	Portfolio Assmt	Demonstration	Challenge Exam	Standard Test	Work Evaluation	Eval Milit Train
1993/94	22.9%	22.5%	54.4%	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%
	365	358	867	0	4	0
1994/95	15.9%	27.9%	55.9%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%
	299	524	1049	0	3	0
1995/96	8.8%	31.9%	59.1%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%
	238	860	1596	0	6	0
1996/97	10.7%	28.9%	59.9%	0.0%	0.5%	0.0%
	286	774	1601	0	14	0
1997/98	16.5%	25.6%	56.9%	0.0%	0.7%	0.3%
	180	279	621	0	8	3
All Years	**15.0%**	**27.4%**	**57.2%**	**0.0%**	**0.4%**	**0.1%**
	1368	**2795**	**5734**	**0**	**35**	**3**

TABLE 8B

Annual Number of PLAR Assessments by Method (Fanshawe College Only)

Course	Assessment Methods (Percent and Number)					
Completion Date	Portfolio Assmt	Demonstration	Challenge Exam	Standard Test	Work Evaluation	Eval Milit Train
1993/94	33.3%	0.0%	66.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
	1	0	2	0	0	0
1994/95	7.5%	0.0%	92.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
	3	0	37	0	0	0
1995/96	31.9%	0.0%	68.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
	43	0	92	0	0	0
1996/97	62.6%	0.0%	37.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
	82	0	49	0	0	0
1997/98	53.7%	0.0%	46.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
	117	0	101	0	0	0
All Years	**37.8%**	**0.0%**	**62.2%**	**0.0%**	**0.0%**	**0.0%**
	246	**0**	**281**	**0**	**0**	**0**

Note: Fanshawe College is excluded from the first table due to use of only two categories by that institution. Larger institutions have more data and their effect is a disproportionate skewing of the National Percent values. To make these values more representative they are calculated by averaging the percents for the (7) institutions thereby giving all of them an equal "weight". Data for 1997/98 are partial only for Mohawk College and Red River College.

PLAR PROGRAM ACTIVITY

PLAR learners had assessments in a total of 362 different programs. Most learners were enrolled in only one program during the study period (77%). However in some institutions, learners were enrolled in more than one program either sequentially or concurrently during the study period. Most assessments were conducted in programs offered on both a full-time and part-time basis (linked 3,796 times to PLAR assessments).

Across the institutions, the ten programs with the most assessments were Techniques Ambulancieres, Early Childhood Education, Nursing, Child and Youth Care Worker, Health Care Aide, Business and Administrative Studies, Recreation and Leisure Services, Business Computer Applications, Office Administration – Executive and Microcomputer Applications. Many assessments were in part-time studies and general studies which at some institutions, are classified as programs for administrative purposes. Excluding these programs, **the most common credentials for which PLAR occurred were in 2 year diplomas.** Table 9 presents the top ten programs and their discipline, length, program status, credential and number of assessments at each institution.

TABLE 9

Top Ten Programs by Institutions

Program Name	Length	Discipline	Status	Type	# Asssmts
Ahuntsic					
Techniques Ambulancières	1½ Academic Years	HS	FT	A	1107
Imagerie Ultrasonore Cardiaque	1½ Academic Years	HS	B	A	58
Imagerie Ultrasonore Abdominale Et Pelvienne	1½ Academic Years	HS	B	A	55
Techniques De Radiothérapie	1½ Academic Years	HS	B	A	33
Instrumentation Et Contrôle	1½ Academic Years	T	B	A	33
Techniques Policières	3 Academic Years	HUS	B	D	30
Techniques Juridiques	1½ Academic Years	HUS	B	A	28
Sureté Industrielle Et Commerciale	2 Academic Years	O	B	A	21
Imagerie Ultrasonore Fœtale	1½ Academic Years	HS	B	A	20
Études Hors Programme	1½ Academic Years	O	B	A	18
Conestoga					
Recreation And Leisure Services	2 Academic Years	HUS	B	D	123
Microcomputer Applications Certificate	1 Academic Year	B	B	C	31
Critical Care Nursing	2 Academic Years	HS	PT	PDC	19
Early Childhood Education	2 Academic Years	HUS	PT	D	15
Teacher/Trainer Of Adults	1 Academic Year	AA	PT	C	14
Business Administration/Accounting	3 Academic Years	B	FT	D	13
Cardiac Care	1 Academic Year	HS	PT	PDC	12
Microcomputer Software	<1 Academic Year	B	FT	C	6
Business Administration/Marketing	3 Academic Years	B	FT	D	6
Volunteer Management	1 Academic Year	HUS	PT	C	6
Douglas					
Financial Services	1½ Academic Years	B	B	C	105
Community Support Worker	2 Academic Years	HUS	B	D	86
Child and Youth Care Counsel	2 Academic Years	HUS	B	D	85
Home Support Worker	1½ Academic Years	HUS	B	C	63
Resident Care Attendant	2 Academic Years	HUS	B	D	44
Therapeutic Recreation	2 Academic Years	HUS	B	D	37
Science	2 Academic Years	SC	B	D	24
Arts	2 Academic Years	AA	B	D	20
General Business	1½ Academic Years	B	B	C	20
Marketing Management	2 Academic Years	B	B	D	17

Fanshawe					
Early Childhood Education	2 Academic Years	HUS	B	D	77
Child And Youth Worker	3 Academic Years	HUS	B	D	22
Developmental Services Worker	2 Academic Years	HUS	B	D	20
Social Service Worker	2 Academic Years	HUS	B	D	18
Pharmacy Assistant	1 Academic Year	HS	B	C	16
Office Administration – General	1 Academic Year	B	B	C	14
Environmental Eng. Tech'N Waste Mgmt	2 Academic Years	T	B	D	13
Computer Systems Support	1 Academic Year	B	B	C	12
Personal Support Worker	1 Academic Year	HUS	B	C	11
Health Care Aide	1 Academic Year	HS	PT	C	10
Law & Security Administration	2 Academic Years	B	B	D	10
Mohawk					
Business Computer Applications	1 Academic Year	B	PT	C	119
Nursing	3 Academic Years	HS	FT	D	114
Office Administration – Executive	2 Academic Years	B	FT	D	113
Competence In The French Language	1 Academic Year	AA	PT	C	97
Pharmacy Assistant 1	1 Academic Year	HS	B	C	92
Business Applications For Windows	1 Academic Year	B	PT	C	71
Office Administration – Medical	2 Academic Years	B	FT	D	69
Business Administration	3 Academic Years	B	B	D	67
Early Childhood Education	2 Academic Years	HUS	B	D	59
Social Services	2 Academic Years	HUS	B	D	55
North Atlantic					
Early Childhood Distance Education	2 Academic Years	HUS	FT	D	247
Computer Studies Co-Op	3 Academic Years	B	FT	D	24
Applied Business Information Technology	<1 Academic Year	B	FT	PDC	17
Computer Support Specialist	2 Academic Years	B	FT	D	8
Office Admin. General First Year	<1 Academic Year	B	FT	C	3
Business Management (Marketing)	3 Academic Years	B	FT	D	3
Graphic Design	2 Academic Years	AA	FT	D	2
Business Management General First Year	<1 Academic Year	B	FT	C	2
Adult Basic Education	<1 Academic Year	GS	FT	C	1
Textile Studies	2 Academic Years	AA	FT	D	1
Programmer Analyst (Business)	2 Academic Years	B	FT	D	1
Electronics Engineering Technology (Integrated Information Systems) Co-Op	3 Academic Years	T	FT	D	1
Electrical Engineering	3 Academic Years	T	FT	D	1
Business Management (Accounting)	3 Academic Years	B	FT	D	1
Red River					
Early Childhood Education	2 Academic Years	HUS	B	D	617
Nursing	2 Academic Years	HS	FT	D	494
Health Care Aide	1 Academic Year	HS	B	C	212
Child & Youth Care Worker	2 Academic Years	HUS	B	C	155
Business & Admin Studies	2 Academic Years	B	PT	C	126
Microcomputer Applications	1 Academic Year	B	PT	C	88
Admin Studies	2 Academic Years	B	PT	C	76
Health Care Aide/Unit Clerk	1 Academic Year	HS	B	C	57
Electronic Engineering Technology	2 Academic Years	T	B	D	39
Developmental Services Worker	2 Academic Years	HUS	PT	C	32

Note: Part-time programs were assigned program lengths equal to what the lengths would be if the programs were delivered on a full-time basis. Courses in con. Ed. or part-time.

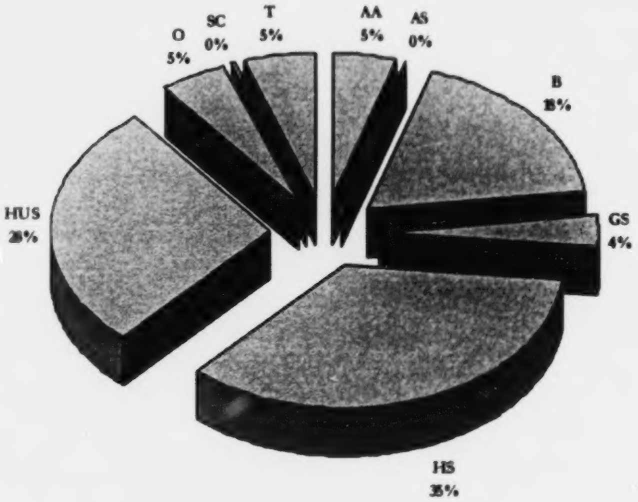
Disciplines

The programs in which PLAR learners had assessments spanned nine discipline categories: Applied Arts, Applied Science, Business, General Studies, Health Sciences, Human Services, Science, Technology and Other. Chart 8 shows the number of assessments by discipline.

CHART 8

Total Number of Assessments by Discipline

AA	Applied Arts
AS	Applied Science
B	Business
GS	General Studies
HS	Health Sciences
HUS	Human Services
O	Other
SC	Science
T	Technology



Overall, **most assessments were conducted in the Health Sciences and Human Services disciplines. However at individual institutions this varied, revealing that large numbers of assessments in Business were also conducted at several institutions.**

Observations

The partners originally intended to examine PLAR in programs that were common across institutions. However there were no programs with PLAR activity that were common to all seven institutions and very few common to more than two institutions when criteria of at least 2 assessments was applied. Reasons for the lack of programs in common, are unclear but may be in part due to limited program offerings at some institutions and colleges' mandates to design curriculum to meet local needs.

The high concentration of assessments in the Health Sciences, Human Services and Business disciplines may be due to several legal, political and economic factors. Downsizing, quality assurance initiatives and changing job requirements of employers or through new regulations may be factors in relation to programs such as Health Care Aide. The introduction of new technology into some occupations may also play a part in occupations such as Ambulance Attendant. Workplace closings have left skilled individuals with inadequate documentation on their knowledge and skills and a need for credentials to obtain new employment. Many people in Human Services fields have practical experience directly related to college course content and field practicum requirements.

PLAR LEARNER SUCCESS

Concerns have been expressed over the years about the academic integrity of the PLAR process and the likelihood of PLAR learners' success following assessment. This Study has examined several elements of PLAR learner success:

- course grades in courses acquired through PLAR and traditional delivery
- number of courses taken
- graduation statistics

PLAR learners' performances in these areas were also compared with those of a sampling of traditional students in the same programs. These programs are referred to as the "selected programs". In order to accommodate the different course grading arrangements used by the partner institutions, their grading systems were converted to a single numeric system. Table 10 explains the conversion.

TABLE 10

Conversion Table for Grades in Courses Acquired Through PLAR

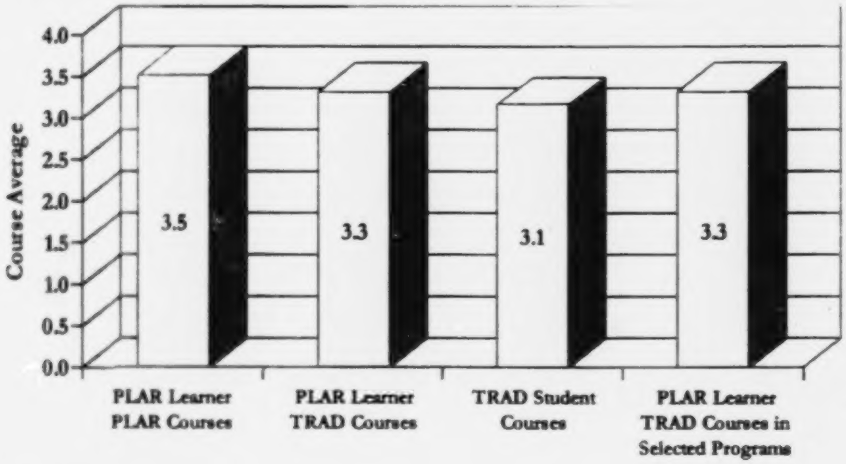
NUMERIC DESIGNATION	LETTER GRADE	NUMBER GRADE	UNGRADED RESULTS
4	A+, A, A-	80 - 100%	M – Mastery
3	B+, B, B-	70 - 79%	P – Pass
2	C+, C, C-	60 - 69%	UF – Unsuccessful
1	D+, D, D-	50- 59%	W/I – Withdrawn/ Incomplete
			E – Exemption

Course Grades in Courses Acquired Through PLAR and Traditional Delivery

Chart 9 presents PLAR learners' average grades in courses acquired through PLAR and average course grades in courses acquired through traditional delivery. Chart 9 also present PLAR learners' average grades in the same programs as traditional students and the traditional students' grades in those same programs.

CHART 9

Average Grades of PLAR Learners and TRAD Students



Note: Traditional student data is based on a sampling of students.

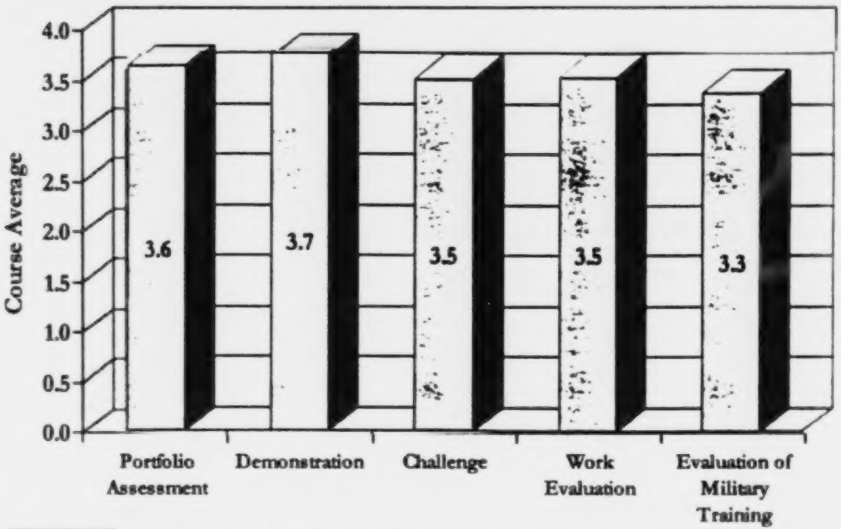
Observations

The evidence indicates that overall the average passing grade in courses acquired through PLAR was slightly higher than in traditional courses. PLAR learners' grades were slightly higher than traditional students' grades.

Chart 10 presents PLAR learners' average passing course grades by assessment method. These results were consistent across institutions.

CHART 10

PLAR Learners' Average Course Grades by Assessment Method



Note: Traditional student data is based on a sampling of students.

Analysis of PLAR learner grades revealed the following:

- Approximately 94% of all assessments were successful (i.e. credit awarded); 6.0% were unsuccessful. The ratio of successful to unsuccessful PLAR grades (including credit not awarded, withdrawn, incomplete) was approximately 16:1.
- The average grade of courses passed by PLAR learners through traditional delivery was 3.3. Approximately 90% were successful and 10% were unsuccessful. The ratio of successful to unsuccessful grades was approximately 9:1.

In comparing PLAR learners to traditional students in the same programs,

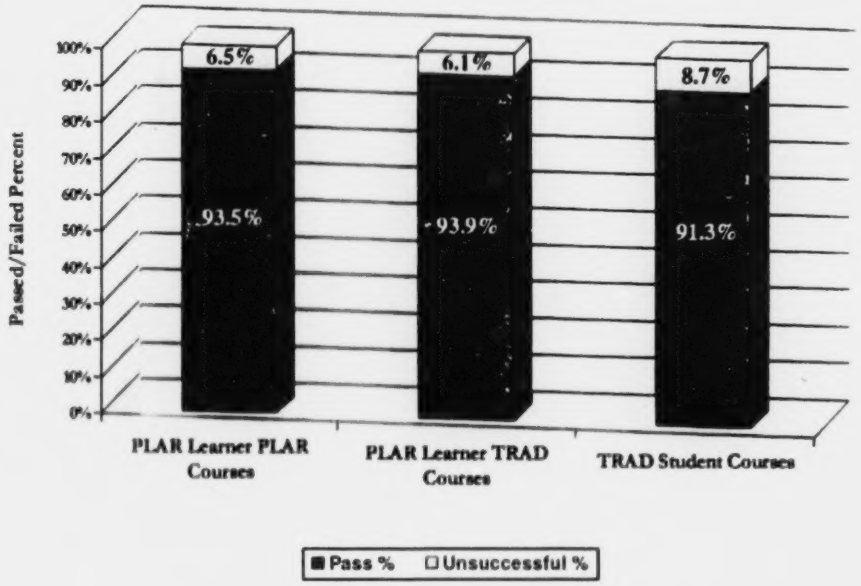
- PLAR learners averaged a passing grade of 3.3 in all courses taken over the 5 years. The ratio of successful to unsuccessful grades was 15:1
- Traditional students averaged a passing grade of 3.1 in all courses taken over the 5 years. The ratio of successful to unsuccessful grades was 10:1.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Chart 11 presents the percentage of courses in which PLAR learners and traditional students were successful. All calculations involving successful and unsuccessful assessments are based on data from five institutions only. College Ahuntsic and Douglas College have been excluded as they do not have data on unsuccessful assessments.

CHART 11

Percentage of Courses in which PLAR Learners and TRAD Students were Successful

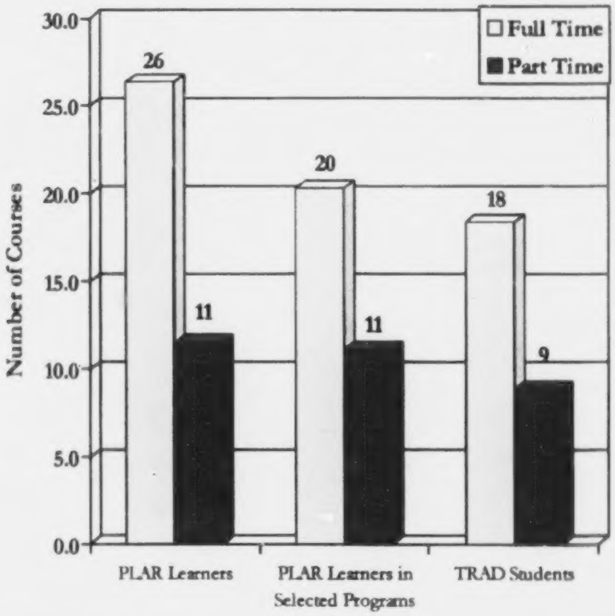


Number of Courses Taken

On average, PLAR learners took more courses than traditional students. PLAR full-time learners averaged 26 courses compared to 18 courses by traditional student in the same programs. Part-time PLAR learners averaged 11 courses over the 5 years compared to 9 courses by traditional students in the same programs. Chart 12 illustrates this finding. The reasons for this phenomenon requires further research.

CHART 12

Average Number of Courses Taken by Full Time (FT) and Part Time (PT) PLAR Learners Compared to TRAD Students



Note: This calculation was made based on student status. Since some learners and students had more than one status during the 5-year period, the total number exceeds the total number of learners and students. Traditional student data is based on a sampling of students.

Graduation Statistics

Analysis of graduation rates was complicated by the fact that PLAR learners and traditional students did not necessarily begin their programs during the study period. Many came to institutions with a range of credits from other institutions for which credit may have been given through exemption or advanced standing. In addition, program enrolment dates were recorded on the basis of academic years only (not semesters) and were not always reliable indicators of when a program of study commenced. However, these complications apply to both PLAR learners and traditional students. The limitations have been mitigated to an extent by restricting analysis to learners and students in 2 and 3 year programs only. The evidence indicates that:

- approximately **41%** of PLAR learners' program enrolments resulted in graduations over the 5-year study period compared to **36%** of traditional students' enrolments.
- the average grade point average of PLAR learner graduates was 3.5 compared to 3.4 for traditional student graduates in the same programs. (For the purposes of this Study, grade point average was calculated by averaging each graduate's grades in all courses).

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Observations

Approximately 52% of PLAR assessments in the database were graded using the 1 - 4 numeric system. Most of the remaining courses were graded by letter (M – mastery, P – pass, W/I – withdrawn/incomplete, UF – unsuccessful/fail). Approximately 400 courses (.5%) had no grades available.

In summary, analysis of the data on course grades, course success rates, number of courses taken, graduation rates and graduation grade point averages indicate that PLAR learners' academic performances were equal to or higher than traditional students in the same programs. PLAR learners' passing grades were equal to or slightly higher than those of traditional students. This corroborates the findings of Reidel (1982). Their success rates (ie pass rates) were substantially higher than traditional students. PLAR learners took more courses than traditional students. Their graduation rates were higher. Their grade point averages were slightly higher. These results support the findings of Hoffman (1996).

The high level of academic success among PLAR learners may be due to several factors including self-selection. PLAR also promotes self-directed learning, which is highly motivational to many adults. It is also the experience of all partners that adult learners have a strong desire to complete their training, particularly in programs directly related to employment or occupational certification.

The findings suggest that rather than impeding PLAR learners' success, PLAR facilitates learning through recognition.

SUMMARY OF LEARNER/STUDENT DATA ANALYSIS

This report examines the academic activity of 3,519 institutionally recorded PLAR learners from 1993/94 to 1997/98 (partial year for two institutions). The learners had 7,912 prior learning assessments in over 1,400 courses. Anecdotal evidence indicates that an additional number of PLAR assessments were conducted at most of the partner institutions but lack of documentation prevented inclusion in the Study. PLAR learners also took 39,997 traditional courses in 362 programs in nine disciplines. Data on a sampling of 11,785 traditional students in 58 programs were also collected for the purpose of comparison with PLAR learners. The records of 237,115 courses taken by traditional students were compiled.

- Approximately 65% of all PLAR learners were female and 35% were male. At every institution but one, female PLAR learners were in the majority.
- Most PLAR learners were mature adults. Nationally, 52% of PLAR learners were over 30 years of age. Approximately 38 % were over the age of 35 years and 12% were over the age of 45 years. The overall average age of PLAR learners was 33 years compared to 27 years for traditional students.
- Approximately 63% of PLAR learners were part-time students and 37% were full-time students at the time of their prior learning assessments.
- A total of 72% of PLAR learners received orientation to PLAR
- Approximately 12% of PLAR learners took a portfolio development course and went on to use their portfolios for assessment. Approximately 66% of these learners took a credit portfolio course and 34% took a non-credit course.
- Considering the length of the study period and the number of partner institutions, the total number of assessments conducted were low.
- The average number of assessments per learner was 2.3 courses. A majority of learners had only one assessment and a total of 74.5% had two assessments or fewer.

- The average PLAR learner acquired a noteworthy percentage of their courses through PLAR (16%).
- Early concerns about learners acquiring large percentages of their credentials through PLAR thereby jeopardizing the legitimacy institutions' credentials were unrealized.
- Approximately 95% of PLAR learners had their assessments in the first year of their program.
- The most common method of assessment among the partner institutions was challenge and the least common was workplace training program evaluation. College Ahuntsic was the only institution to report activity in the assessment of military training programs for credit.
- The overall low use of workplace training evaluation throughout the five years highlights a potential area for concentrated development.
- The most common credentials for which PLAR occurred were in 2 year diplomas.
- The programs in which PLAR learners had assessments spanned nine discipline categories: Applied Arts, Applied Science, Business, General Studies, Health Sciences, Human Services, Science, Technology and Other. Most assessments were conducted in the Health Sciences and Human Services disciplines. However at individual institutions this varied, revealing that large numbers of assessments in Business were also conducted at several institutions.
- PLAR learners' academic performances were equal to or higher than traditional students in the same programs. PLAR learners' passing grades were equal to or slightly higher than those of traditional students. Their success rates (ie pass rates) were higher than traditional students. PLAR learners took more courses than traditional students. Their graduation rates were higher. Their grade point averages were slightly higher.

EVALUATION OF MILITARY TRAINING

College Ahuntsic offers a variety of educational services to Canadian military personnel through the Collegial Studies Program for the Canadian Armed Forces CSPCAF (Programme d'études collégiales des Forces Canadiennes - PECFC). The CSPCAF's goal is to allow military personnel and their families greater access to college education. It is a gateway, as well as an orientation service and it provides support to persons pursuing college studies.

The service contract between the Canadian Armed Forces and College Ahuntsic includes all costs related to assessment: a part-time counsellor and relatively high transportation costs incurred by expert team travel to Canadian Armed Forces bases across Canada where the training is given (usually 3 people). The Quebec Ministry of Education does not finance this activity. The military personnel who sign up for the Collegial Studies Program of the Canadian Forces must pay a $50 file study fee. No other fee is levied to provide equivalencies for training and files remain open for updates without further fees.

The goal of the Collegial Studies Program is not to evaluate the military program itself, but to establish equivalencies between military programs and similar college programs. Therefore, the decisions made must not be taken as judgements on the value of the evaluated programs, but as identification of the common points between them. The educational assistance provided includes all relevant information concerning the following:

- occupations and study programs in Quebec (150 collegial study programmes that lead directly to the job market).
- assessment of academic and military files for recognition of equivalencies for occupations and courses as well as training undertaken at other colleges and universities.
- the choice of a program or course at any Quebec cegep and information on pre - requisites from secondary education, the admission quota and other relevant information.
- a study program profile: what courses must be completed in order to graduate.
- A Collegial Studies confirmation letter that recognises the value of college training in terms of full - time study years. When a diploma has not yet been awarded, this letter may serve as a supporting document when searching for employment.
- prior learning assessment and recognition on an individual basis

The service offered by College Ahuntsic includes a comparative analysis of the training programs offered in the military to equivalent civilian college programs. In most cases, credit award requests are successful. New categories of military professional groups are analysed every year.

History

The evaluation method used in this process was developed by the American Council on Education in order to evaluate the training offered by the U.S. Army in 1945 following World War II. This method places emphasis on the conditions in which training is given, not only on the analysis of the course content.

Following the establishment of PLAR services at College Ahuntsic, and in order to implement rigorous but fair assessment procedures of military training in Canada, the College sent a study team to the American Council on Education in the spring of 1986 to become familiar with their model of evaluating military training. In 1986-1987, College Ahuntsic experimented with evaluation by jury consensus. The first experiment took place at the Borden military base in Ontario and compared the training of military police to the police training program at College Ahuntsic.

Since that date, the College has co-ordinated the assessment of various military training programs including electronics technician, paramedical technician, combat arms, administration, accounting, cartography and others. In each case, a faculty team from three different cegeps met with the military personnel responsible for the project at the military base where the training was carried out. Equivalencies were established between specific training programs for military occupations and similar civilian occupations at the college level. To date, more than twenty cegeps have participated in this initiative.

The Process

Criteria must be respected in the choice of assessors: they must have broad knowledge of the objectives of their program and courses and be aware of PLAR practices regarding non-college training programs. The evaluation procedure includes the following steps:

- Identification of the military occupation to be evaluated. The occupations are determined by the Department of National Defence
- Pre - assessment. There are minimum documentation requirements for each program; its objectives, duration, content, teaching material and evaluation method.
- Initial comparative analysis of the program. If the elements for comparison are not sufficient, the procedure can be halted at this stage and a detailed pre - assessment report is written. If the various elements that allow comparison to a collegial program are present, an assessment committee is set up (experts in the occupation at the college level).
- Assessment session: a detailed analysis is carried out on site at the military school where the training is given. The evaluation is conducted by the instructors of the military program and college program specialists. The on-site visit generally takes about 2 days. At the completion of the evaluation, consensus must be reached regarding equivalencies to be awarded. Generally, consensus is reached very quickly among experts and the participation of experts in the field along with specialists from three different colleges ensures objective assessment.
- Production and presentation of an analysis report and an equivalency table.
- Awarding of equivalencies by Ahuntsic College.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

For the purpose of the Cross-Canada Study on PLAR, College Ahuntsic's military program evaluation activities were examined for the year 1996/97. Approximately 281 personnel had their military training accredited through the Collegial Studies Program. Participants were 243 males and 37 females. All learners received PLAR orientation. Assessments were conducted in 19 different programs, the most common being Techniques Administratives, Science de la Nature, Technologie de l'electronique, Introduction a la Supervision, Programs Maison, Techniques Policiers and Electronique.

The learners were involved in six disciplines: Business (122), Technology (106), Other (27), Human Services (17), Health Sciences (6), and Arts (4). A total of 3,446 equivalencies (courses) were included in the evaluations. The courses ranged in length from 30 hours to 120 hours. No additional forms of PLAR were combined with the training evaluation procedures.

Observations

The cegeps' experiences have confirmed the efficacy of this approach to PLAR. This evaluation process is an example of PLAR operating in direct relation to the job market and the recognition of acquired occupational competencies. College Ahuntsic believes that the Collegial Studies Program with the Department of National Defence provides a successful example of workplace training recognition and a PLAR model that could be developed by the business community as well.

College Ahuntsic's positive experience with evaluating military training and the potential for expansion to other institutions and jurisdictions is consistent with American instutions reported by Boe and Whittaker'survey (1992) that 84.6% of surveyed post-secondary institutions accepted military training recommendations from the American Council on Education.

PART THREE

FINANCIAL ANALYSIS OF PLAR ACTIVITIES IN 1996/97

INTRODUCTION

The methodology of the financial analysis component of this Study proved the most challenging. Financial information on institutional costs of PLAR and traditional programs was difficult to obtain. Many direct and indirect cost items were integrated into institutions' base budgets and could not be segregated with precision. In addition, the items that each institution considered direct and indirect costs varied, as did the financial arrangements under which they conducted their assessments. Accounting practices differed and few were conducive to clearly identifying costs at a program level. Payments to assessors varied across and within institutions and in some cases were undocumented. As a result, several elements of the calculations involved attributions of cost items rather than documented costs. Nevertheless, these attributions are realistic using methodologies similar to those used by governments and institutions when precise cost data are unavailable. At the completion of financial data collection, the finance departments of each institution confirmed the accuracy of the Study's financial calculations. It was noted however, that costing arrangements were so unique that meaningful cross-institutional comparisons would be unfeasible.

The primary goals of the financial analysis were to identify institutional and learner costs associated with PLAR and to compare the cost of "producing" a course/credit through PLAR with the cost of "producing" a course/credit through traditional delivery. Anecdotal and documented evidence from institutions in other jurisdictions (e.g. Coastline Community College, University of Maryland University College) indicate that credits earned through PLAR are less costly to institutions than credits through traditional delivery. Since the partners believe that lack of data relating to costs is a contributing factor to the low level of government support provided in several provincial jurisdictions, this part of the report provides information useful to institutional and government policy makers. The year 1996/97 was selected for data collection, as it was the year in which the Study partners could obtain the most complete and current financial data. Restricting the analysis to one year also ensured a manageable workload for Study partners.

DATA COLLECTION METHODOLOGY

The initial intent of the partners was to include costs to learners related to employment, employability, transportation, dependent care and other expenses. However, it became clear early on in the Study that this information was not available from the institutions and would require a study involving PLAR learners themselves.

PLAR assessment costs in programs that had at least two assessments in 1996/97 were considered priority. The costs of PLAR in the remaining programs (those with just one assessment) were calculated where possible but were otherwise attributed by averaging known costs of assessments. In addition, it was determined that at some institutions, only the costs of PLAR in full-time programs could be calculated with accuracy because the institutions did not keep records of program costs for part-time programs. Financial data on the costs of delivering traditional courses was also collected. The institutional partners prepared background papers that provide details on costing data collection procedures used at each institution.

The financial data collection commenced by dividing the 1996/97 costs of PLAR into three categories: institutions' direct costs of non-assessment PLAR activities, PLAR assessment delivery and learners' direct costs of PLAR. (For details on the data collection and analysis of non-assessment activity costs, assessment delivery costs and learner costs, see Appendix J).

Direct Costs of Non-assessment PLAR Activities

Facilitator activities:

- co-ordinating and delivering faculty and staff professional development
- PLAR marketing within institutions and with workplaces and other external community organizations
- liaison with assessors and program managers
- conduct training in learning outcomes
- PLAR co-ordination with other institutions
- participation in internal and provincial policy development
- PLAR record-keeping and other administrative duties
- conducting PLAR orientation for learners
- providing information on PLAR to students
- conducting research

PLAR Assessment Delivery

Direct costs of assessment delivery at four institutions (Ahuntsic, Douglas, North Atlantic, Red River) were calculated by focusing on the cost of assessors. Three institutions (Conestoga, Fanshawe, Mohawk) included a portion of their PLAR Facilitator's salary and benefits, administrative support, and non-salary expenses in their total direct costs of delivering assessments. Overhead contributions from PLAR assessments are reported as a percentage of revenues.

Direct cost items relating to "producing" a course/credit through PLAR and through traditional course delivery were collected and an Excel data collection tool was designed and used by the institutions to compile the data and calculate costs.

Learners' Direct Costs of PLAR

Learner costs of obtaining course credits through PLAR and traditional delivery in the same program were calculated by obtaining information from each institution on tuition, assessment fees and administrative fees. The relative costs are presented as a scenario involving two hypothetical students seeking to obtain course credits through PLAR and traditional delivery.

FINANCIAL ANALYSIS

The financial analysis was conducted on the basis of the three data collection categories and included the following:

1. Institutions' direct costs of non-assessment PLAR activities in 1996/97
2. PLAR assessment delivery
   a) Revenues generated by PLAR assessments
   b) PLAR assessments' direct costs and contribution to institutional overhead
   c) Indirect costs of PLAR assessments
   d) Average direct costs per course of PLAR assessments compared to average direct costs per course of traditional courses
   e) Contributions to overhead per course
   f) Assessor remuneration
3. Learners' direct costs of PLAR

1. Direct Costs of Non-assessment PLAR Activities in 1996/97

Direct costs of non-assessment PLAR activities are the cost items that contribute directly to the delivery of the range of non-assessment activities conducted at each institution primarily through the work of a PLAR Facilitator. The time spent on these activities varied by institution. Six of the seven institutions provided resources for administrative support for their Facilitators and five institutions provided funds for non-salary expenses such as office supplies, postage, photocopying and telephone calls. Two institutions provided targeted funds for professional development and travel. Details on these costs are provided in Appendix J.

Total direct costs of Facilitators' non-assessment PLAR activities and their contribution to institutional overhead in 1996/97 are provided in Table 11.

TABLE 11

Direct Costs and Contribution to Overhead of Non-assessment PLAR Activities in 1996/97 by Institution

Institution	Revenues from Government	Direct Costs	Contribution to Overhead
Ahuntsic	0	75,600	N/A*
Conestoga	0	68,459	-68,459
Douglas	53,860	55,300	- 1,940
Fanshawe	0	63,820	-63,820
Mohawk	0	44,493	-44,493
North Atlantic	0	15,000	-15,000
Red River	62,878	62,878	0

---

* College Ahuntsic revenues relate to direct costs only. Overhead is funded separately by the Ministry of Education and no overhead contribution is expected.

Observations

Of the seven institutions, two received targeted support from government for non-assessment PLAR activities. The costs of conducting these activities were borne by the operating budgets of the remaining institutions. None of the activities had revenue-generating capacity. As a result no positive contributions to overhead were made at six institutions. Under Quebec's funding mechanism, College Ahuntsic's, overhead was financed 100% by the provincial government under a separate budget. Non-assessment services were not expected to contribute to overhead.

The variation in institutional direct costs of non-assessment activities is due to five main factors:

- The amount of time dedicated by each Facilitator to non-assessment activities (ranging from 20% to 100%).
- Revenues from government to support facilitation services.
- The wide range of salary and position levels of PLAR Facilitators.
- The allocation of administrative support which included dedicated staff on either a part-time or full-time basis or staff shared between departments and functions. Allocations ranged from $0 at College of the North Atlantic to $10,232 at Mohawk College.
- Expenditures on non-salary expenses ranged from $0 at College Ahuntsic and College of the North Atlantic to $4,401 at Fanshawe College.

2. PLAR Assessment Delivery

a. Revenues Generated by PLAR Assessments

PLAR assessment revenues were generated from three main sources: government, learner assessment fees and other administrative fees. At all institutions these revenues were collected to address the direct costs of assessment delivery.

Revenues from government were based on a variety of provincial funding mechanisms. College of the North Atlantic, Douglas College and Red River College received no targeted funds from government for delivering assessments. Conestoga College, Fanshawe College and Mohawk College received funding based on a complex provincial government funding formula that generated revenues for each assessment conducted. Funding was provided at an approximate rate of 14% of the funding provided to support traditional part-time course delivery. Mohawk College also conducted assessments in non-Ministry -approved programs for which it did not receive government support. Hence, its total revenues per assessment are lower than those of Conestoga College and Fanshawe College.

The remaining institution, College Ahuntsic also received government funding to conduct assessments. The rate was 30% of the funding provided to support traditional part-time course delivery. The Province of Quebec had an additional funding arrangement whereby a further 40% funding was provided in all cases where PLAR learners were required to "top up" their learning before credit could be granted, resulting in a total of 70% of the funding provided to support traditional course delivery. For detailed descriptions of the funding formulas used at each institution, see Appendix J or obtain a copy of the partners' background papers.

Revenues from administrative fees were generated by Red River College, which required learners to pay admission fees to enroll in full-time programs prior to taking prior learning assessment. Part-time programs did not charge admission fees. College Ahuntsic also charged PLAR learners a one-time $30.00 administration fee. Table 12 provides a summary of revenues generated by PLAR assessments in 1996/97.

TABLE 12

Revenues Generated by PLAR Assessment Delivery in 1996/97

Institution	Number of Assessments	Revenues from Government	Assessment Fees	Admin. Fees	Total Revenues
Ahuntsic	555	118,839	58,460	2,520	179,819
Conestoga	106	3,342	7,987	0	11,329
Douglas	159	0	15,443	0	15,443
Fanshawe	131	4,130	9,170	0	13,300
Mohawk	432	10,783	27,122	0	37,905
North Atlantic	36	0	1,800	0	1,800
Red River	231	0	17,787	1,960	19,747

Note: Red River College revenues are based on assessments in four full-time programs only. College Ahuntsic assessment revenues are based on three full-time programs only.

Learner Assessment Fee Policies and Practices

All institutions had learner assessment fee policies and practices. Fees ranged from $5 for marking tests to $585 for workplace assessments. However "typical" assessment fees ranged from $50 to $150. College Ahuntsic charged learners $2.00 per course/hour, which is the same as tuition charged to part-time students ($90.00 for a 45-hour course). The three Ontario colleges charged fees set by the provincial government at a rate of approximately one half the tuition charged for a 45-hour part-time course ($70.00 for any length of course). Douglas College charged $138.75 for a 45-hour course. Red River charged up to $150 per course. College of the North Atlantic charged a flat rate of $50.00 per course. Two institutions (Douglas College, Red River College) provided some of their assessments at no charge to learners.

At every institution, assessment fees policy was based on the number of assessments conducted rather than the number of courses or credits attempted or awarded. This provides an interesting comparison to the results of the survey conducted by Boe and Whittaker (1992) in which thirty-nine percent of the 300 institutions surveyed reported charging fees based on the number of credits awarded and 40% based their fees on number of credits attempted. Very few institutions took the approach of the partner institutions. Table 13 summarizes the institutions' policies and practices on payment of assessment fees in 1996/97.

TABLE 13

Institutional Policies and Practices on Assessment Fees

Institution	Policies and Practices on Assessment Fees 1996/97
Ahuntsic	$2.00 per course-hour up to a maximum of $350.00.
Conestoga	$70 per course regardless of course length; provincially set rate.
Douglas	$46.25 per credit to a maximum of 9 credits after which assessments are at no charge. There are generally 3 credits per course.
Fanshawe	$70 per course regardless of course length; provincially set rate.
Mohawk	$70 per course regardless of course length; provincially set rate. In non-Ministry approved programs the fee was usually half of the normal tuition for a part-time course. In a few cases, the fee was the same as the course fee.
North Atlantic	$50 per course; flat rate
Red River	$50 per portfolio assessment; $50/challenge max. of $150 per course; $25/hour for practical tests to a max. of $150 per assessment plus cost of materials costs.

b. Direct Costs of Assessment Delivery and Contribution to Institutional Overhead

Direct costs of PLAR assessment delivery are the cost items that contribute directly to the delivery of assessments. Contributions to overhead are the funds remaining after direct costs have been deducted from revenues. They are generally applied to the overhead costs of institutions' total operations. The exception in this Study is College Ahuntsic whose overhead is financed separately by the Province of Quebec. In their case, the contribution to overhead column in Table 14 and the contribution expressed as a percentage of revenues is not applicable).

At four institutions (Ahuntsic, Douglas, North Atlantic and Red River) the direct costs of assessment delivery involved the costs of assessors. Assessors were the faculty who administered, invigilated and marked assessments. Costs were calculated using institutional records of payments to assessors or attributing an average cost where individual assessor payment records were unavailable. Cost calculations did not include time taken by assessors to prepare assessment tools. Direct costs of assessments at these institutions are shown in Table 14.

At three institutions (Conestoga, Fanshawe and Mohawk), the direct costs of delivering assessments included a portion of the PLAR Facilitator's salary and benefits, administrative support and non-salary expenses. Direct costs of assessments at these institutions are shown in Table 14B. For details on the percentage of Facilitator-related costs included by these institutions, see Appendix J.

At each institution, PLAR assessment overhead contributions were calculated by deducting direct costs from revenues and reporting them as percentages of revenues. For details on the calculations of direct costs and overhead contributions, see Appendix J.

TABLE 14

PLAR Assessment Direct Costs and Contribution to Institutional Overhead at College Ahuntsic, College of the North Atlantic, Douglas College and Red River College

Institution	Number of Assessments	Revenues from PLAR Assessments	Direct Costs of PLAR Assessments	Contribution to Overhead	Contribution to Overhead as a % of Total Revenues
Ahuntsic	535	179,819	32,160	147,659	N/A
Douglas	159	15,443	8,450	6,993	45%
North Atlantic	36	1,800	1,800	0	0%
Red River	231	19,747	16,456	3,291	17%

Note: Red River College revenues are based on four full-time programs. College Ahuntsic revenues are based on three programs. Contributions to overhead at College Ahuntsic are separately funded 100% by the Ministry of Education.

TABLE 14B

PLAR Assessments' Direct Costs and Contribution to Institutional Overhead at Conestoga College, Fanshawe College and Mohawk College

Institution	Number of Assessments	Revenues from PLAR Assessments	Direct Costs of PLAR Assessments	Contribution to Overhead	Contribution to Overhead as a % of Total Revenues
Conestoga	106	11,329	26,537	-15,208	-135%
Fanshawe	131	13,300	40,968	-27,668	-208%
Mohawk	432	37,905	63,634	-25,729	-68%

Observations

At three of the four institutions in Table 14, the direct costs of PLAR assessments were considerably less than revenues and in two cases, assessment revenues made a positive contribution to institutional overhead. The third college had equal revenues and direct costs and PLAR made no contribution to institutional overhead.

At the three institutions in Table 14B, the direct costs of PLAR assessments were higher than revenues and in each case, assessments made notable negative contributions to institutional overhead.

For a more complete picture of assessment costs at all institutions however, future studies should include clearly defined, documented costs of time taken to prepare assessments, amortized where appropriate. In addition, available information of the extent of voluntary contributions by assessors conducting assessments is strictly anecdotal and has not been taken into account. Based on the experience of the partners, these contributions are considerable and future research should attempt to capture these additional costs.

The difference in costs between the two groups of institutions is due in part to the inclusion of a portion of the Facilitators' salaries and benefits, offices and non-salary expenses in the cost of delivery of assessments by the institutions in Table 14b. These institutions appear to have more difficulty than the other colleges in achieving a neutral or positive balance since assessment revenues have been applied against costs associated with the PLAR Facilitator and Office which are non-revenue generating.

The inclusion of different cost items in the costing of assessments make this analysis difficult but is consistent with the results of the Boe and Whittaker (1992) survey in which institutions also differed in their inclusion of items such as materials, staff salaries and advertising as direct costs.

c. Indirect Costs of PLAR Assessments

Indirect costs of PLAR assessments are the portion of overhead contribution that contributes specifically but indirectly to PLAR assessment delivery. Because it was not possible to calculate these costs numerically, Table 15 was prepared using a narrative format. It presents most major institutional indirect cost items and estimates the use PLAR learners made of these items relative to their use by traditional students. The chart includes the PLAR Facilitator and Office as they are indirect costs to an extent at every institution. For details see Appendix J.

TABLE 15

Indirect Costs of PLAR Assessments

Indirect Cost Items	College Ahuntsic	College of the North Atlantic	Conestoga College	Douglas College	Fanshawe College	Mohawk College	Red River College	Overall Rating
General Admin. Services	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Financial Services	Low	Medium	Low	High	Low	Low	Low	Medium
HR/Personnel	Medium	Low	Low**	High	Low	Low	Low	Low
Building and Equipment Administration	Low	Low	Low**	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Registrar	High	Medium	Low	High	Low	Low	High	Medium
Student Support – counselling, advising	Medium	Medium	Low	Medium	Low	Low	Low	Medium
PLAR Facilitator, office, non-salary expenses	Medium	Medium	Low	High	High	High	High	High
Library	Medium	Low	Low	Low*	Low	Low	Medium	Low
Audio Visual	Low	Low	Low**	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Data Processing	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Program Development	High	Low	Low**	Low	Low	Low	Medium	Medium
Educational Technology	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Print/ photocopy	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low

Computer hardware, software, support	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Financial Aid	Low*	Low	Low	Low*	Low	Low	Medium	Low
Athletics, Student Activities	Low*	Low	Low**	Low*	Low	Low*	Low	Low
Health, Safety, Medical Services	Low*	Low	Low**	Low*	Low	Low	Low	Low
Institutional Mgt. – senior admin. time	Low*	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Marketing/ public Relations	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Classroom/ lab space	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Food services	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Bookstore	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Parking	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low

Low = < 1/3 usage of same indirect cost items for traditional student
Medium = < 2/3 usage of same indirect cost items for traditional student
High = close or equal to same indirect cost items for traditional student
* services not generally used at all by PLAR learners (in their PLAR activities)
** estimates are activity-based not effort-based

Recommended cost percentage: no more than 1/3 of traditional indirect costs

Mohawk College indirect cost measures included 50% of the costs of the PLAR Facilitator, office and non-salary expenses.

Fanshawe College indirect cost measures included 75% of the costs of the PLAR Facilitator, 30% of the PLAR office, and non-salary expenses.

Conestoga College indirect cost measures included 75% of the costs of the PLAR Facilitator, office and non-salary expenses.

All other institutions' indirect cost measures included 100% of the costs of the PLAR Facilitator, office and non-salary expenses.

Observations

Table 15 shows that the majority of institutions were consistent in their assessment that a PLAR learner makes proportionately less use of institutional indirect cost items than a traditional student given that in their capacity as a PLAR learner, he or she spends much less time at the institution to obtaining credits. The exception was usage of the PLAR Office and staff. Four institutions reported that the average PLAR learner accessed their services as much as or more than the traditional student. The preponderance of "Low" use of indirect cost items overall, suggests that PLAR learners used institutional indirect cost items at a rate of less than one third that of traditional students. As a result, PLAR assessments should not be expected to generate the same percentages of overhead contributions as traditional program activity.

d. Average Direct Costs per Course of PLAR Assessments Compared to Average Direct Costs per Course of Traditional Courses in 1996/97

The purpose of this analysis is to compare institutional direct costs of two procedures for awarding course credit: credit through PLAR and credit through traditional course delivery. Only programs for which traditional course data was collected in 1996/97, were included in this analysis. Once again the institutions were divided into two groups: the first group excluded Facilitator costs from the costs of assessment delivery and the second group included portions of Facilitator costs, administrative support and non-salary expenses.

College Ahuntsic, College of the North Atlantic, Douglas College and Red River College

Institutions' total direct costs of assessment delivery were divided by the number of assessments to obtain an average direct cost per assessment. The average direct cost of traditional courses in the same programs was similarly calculated by totaling direct costs of course delivery and dividing the result by the number of course registrations. The result is an average direct per course cost of an assessment and a traditional course (see Tables 16 and 16b).

Due to difficulties in applying the financial analysis formulas to traditional programming at College Ahuntsic, an alternative procedure was devised to calculate their traditional direct course costs. Taking into account the funding mechanism in Quebec, College Ahuntsic prepared a calculation that more accurately reflected the reality of their financial circumstances in which programs are almost fully funded by the Province and no tuition is charged to full-time students. PLAR assessment costs and the direct costs of traditional delivery in the three selected programs were calculated using a provincial formula that multiplies the Ministry's per course funding figure for each program by the number of hours in a course. The Ministry per course funding figure was obtained by averaging the funding rates of the three programs. An average course length of 45 hours was used as this represented the majority of course lengths for these programs in the database.

Contributions to overhead are provided where applicable.

TABLE 16

Average Direct Cost per Course of PLAR Assessments and Traditional Courses in Selected Programs at Four Institutions (1996/97)

Institution	Average Cost per Assessment	Contribution to Overhead as a % of Revenue	Average Cost of Traditional Course per Registration	Contribution to Overhead as a % of Revenue
Ahuntsic	60	N/A**	356*	N/A**
Douglas	53	48%	333	41%
North Atlantic	50	0%	111	50%
Red River	71	17%	203	See note

Note: Red River College's provincial funding is a block grant for all funded activities, programs and services. This grant accounts for over 70% of the college's net revenue. It is not possible to accurately compute contribution to overhead on a per course basis for a traditional course. The contribution to overhead is slightly different from Table 14 for some colleges in the above table because the calculations relate only to selected programs.

* Cost is based on a 45 hour course at an average traditional course rate of $7.91.

** Not Applicable. College Ahuntsic's overhead is financed 100% separately by the Province.

Observations

Table 16 indicates that all four institutions' direct costs of PLAR assessments were less than half of the direct costs of traditional course delivery. If assessment preparation time had been included in the cost calculations however, PLAR costs would have been higher.

Conestoga College, Fanshawe College and Mohawk College

The three partner institutions considered activities of their PLAR Facilitator as advisor, to be an extension of the academic departments. Therefore, a portion of the Facilitator's salary and benefits, administrative support and non-salary expenses were included in the calculation of the direct costs of assessment delivery. These costs were totaled and divided by the number of assessments to obtain an average per course cost of assessments. The average per course cost of traditional courses in the same programs was similarly calculated by totaling direct costs of courses and dividing the result by the number of course registrations. The course contribution to overhead is also provided for information purposes. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 16B.

TABLE 16B

Average Direct Cost per Course of PLAR Assessments and Traditional Courses In Selected Programs at Three Institutions (1996/97)

Institution	Average Direct Cost per Assessment	Contribution to Overhead as a % of Revenue	Average Direct Cost of Traditional Course per Registration	Contribution to Overhead as a % of Revenue
Conestoga College	251	-135%	209	27%
Fanshawe College	316	-215%	264	28%
Mohawk College	143	-69%	291	28%

Note: The above costs are based on the direct costs of assessors and a portion of the Facilitator salary and benefits, and in two cases, administrative support and non-salary expenses. The contribution to overhead is slightly different from Table 14B for some colleges in the above table because the calculations relate only to selected programs.

Observations

Table 16B shows that there is a wide range of per course costs of PLAR assessments across the three colleges. One insitution's assessment costs (Mohawk College) are dramatically less than the others even though it attributed the greatest percentage of Facilitator costs to the cost of assessment delivery (50%). Mohawk's assessment costs were lower than traditional course delivery. The table also shows that at the other two institutions, PLAR assessments cost substantially more than traditional courses. The differences in these costs are primarily due to the Ontario Ministry of Education funding formula that rewarded volume of assessment. Mohawk's assessments were 4 times those of Conestoga College and more than triple those of Fanshawe College. The latter two colleges' much more recent entry into the delivery of PLAR may be a significant factor affecting their volume of assessments.

Regardless of the methods used by the partner institutions to calculate costs, the result is that at every institution but two (Conestoga College and Fanshawe College) the direct costs of delivering PLAR was 50% or less than the direct costs of traditional course delivery. These results support existing anecdotal and documented evidence from Reidel (1982) that course credits earned through PLAR are less costly to institutions than course credits earned through traditional delivery. This would appear to suggest a financial incentive to provide assessments at these institutions. Further investigation is required to determine why at two of the three Ontario colleges direct costs of assessment delivery exceeded the costs of traditional course delivery.

A comparison of per course costs involving several programs at each institution is presented in Appendix K by program and institution. The costs were calculated using the same formula as in this section on per course costs.

It was not the purpose of this data analysis to compare costs of assessments across institutions. The partners identified institutional differences in revenue sources, funding and accounting systems that rendered cross-institutional comparisons impractical and misleading.

e. Contributions to Overhead per Course

When direct costs were deducted from PLAR and traditional course delivery revenues on a per course basis, remaining revenues from traditional course delivery (ie contribution to overhead) were substantially higher than revenues from PLAR assessments at five of the seven institutions.

This may be due in part, to higher fees charged to traditional students but may also be caused provincial funding structures that provided no or low support for PLAR assessments. Examples are British Columbia and Newfoundland where no support was provided for assessment delivery. Another example is Ontario where government support for traditional course delivery were approximately seven times the support provided for PLAR assessment delivery. It is noteworthy that in Quebec where PLAR was resourced to the greatest extent, PLAR had a significant positive balance relative to traditional courses (that had a balanced budget). The basis for Douglas College and Red River College's positive balance for PLAR delivery without assistance from government funding also warrants further investigation but may be due in part to assessment fees that can be up to double the fees charged in Ontario and triple those charged in Newfoundland. Table 17 summarizes contributions at each institution after direct costs have been deducted.

TABLE 17

Contribution after Direct Cost Deductions per Course

Institution	Contribution Per PLAR Course	Contribution Per Traditional Course
College Ahuntsic	+276	0
College of the North Atlantic	0	+110
Conestoga College	-144	+185
Douglas College	+44	+232
Fanshawe College	-215	+128
Mohawk College	-58	+114
Red River College	+14	See Note*

Note: Red River College's provincial funding is a block grant for all funded activities, programs and services. This grant accounts for over 70% of the college's net revenues. A computation of public funding on a per course basis for a traditional full-time program would not be accurate.

Overhead contributions do not take indirect costs into account.

Revenues from government for traditional course delivery at College Ahuntsic equaled the costs resulting in a balance of "0". Revenues from assessment fees at College of the North Atlantic equaled costs. Therefore PLAR costs and revenues balanced.

f. Assessor Remuneration

In 4,796 cases, assessors were remunerated for conducting assessments primarily through cash payments over and above their normal compensation. In 2,583 cases, assessments were considered part of the normal workload and assessors were not additionally remunerated. Other assessments were conducted on a voluntary basis or by using personal time in excess of the time paid for by the institutions. Cash payments ranged from $5 for marking computer courses to $215 for fieldwork assessments. A total of 7,725 records were available on assessor payments. A breakdown of methods of assessor remuneration over and above normal workload payments is provided in Table 18.

TABLE 18

Methods of Assessor Remuneration Over and Above Normal Workload Payments

Institution	Transaction Fee (cash)	Time Off of Overtime in Lieu	Overtime	Other	Not Available	Not Applicable	Number of Assessments
Ahuntsic	1782	–	–	–	–	–	1782
Conestoga	445	–	–	–	–	–	445
Douglas	301	–	–	–	–	212	931
Fanshawe	212	–	–	130	185	–	527
Mohawk	1681	–	–	–	4	1	1855
North Atlantic	27	–	–	–	2	3	310
Red River	348	–	–	–	–	–	2067
TOTAL	**4796**	**–**	**–**	**130**	**191**	**216**	

Observations

The evidence indicates a wide range of remuneration practices across the institutions. Some colleges assume that assessing prior learning is part of the day to day work of faculty and no extra remuneration is paid. Others pay a standard amount that is unrelated to the actual amount of time spent doing the assessments. Still others pay assessors on almost an ad hoc basis depending on how much extra work they estimate the assessment will take. The data gathered through assessor focus groups indicated inconsistency of practice and confusion by assessors regarding their own institutional policies on remuneration. At some institutions, strong views were expressed by assessors that they were not adequately remunerated for the total time involved in their assessment work and that this inadequacy breeds negativism about PLAR. Skepticism was expressed about the seriousness with which institutions viewed PLAR if they were not prepared to address problems concerning remuneration. Some were

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

concerned that with current activity levels, faculty can cope with the number of assessments they are asked to do but this would not be the case if the volume of activity was to rise. At other institutions assessor remuneration did not appear to be a significant issue.

The impact of lack of agreement and clarity around remuneration for conducting PLAR assessments at some institutions was manifested in a reluctance by faculty to participate in PLAR until appropriate compensation arrangements were made. The pressures on faculty have eased somewhat with the realization that large numbers of learners asking for many assessments was not going to materialize. However the issue remains essentially unresolved and efforts to address it systematically have not been successful. Institutions interested in implementing PLAR for the first time should consider this issue essential to the successful implementation of PLAR and its long-term integration into day to day college operations.

3. Learners' Direct Costs of PLAR

Learners' costs of assessment are presented in this section by following two hypothetical students through one year of their college experience as part-time students. In conducting this comparison, data that represent some of the most common characteristics and practices of PLAR learners in 1996/97 have been taken from the database and a similar traditional student profile in the same program has been devised to compare costs.

This Study was not able to capture some of the most important costs of attendance for these students, particularly those related to employment, transportation and dependent care. These types of costs are critical to any thorough analysis of learner costs and should be considered in future studies on the costs and benefits of PLAR.

Student A – Paulette Lars (PLAR learner)

Paulette is 33 years old and hopes to obtain retraining in a field related to her previous occupation as a pediatric nurse. She wishes to enroll as a part-time student in a full-time program in the Human Services discipline. Paulette selects Early Childhood Education. She believes that her background has given her the knowledge and skills necessary to undertake PLAR in two courses. She is also able to attend classes in two courses, one per semester. Her employer, at a local daycare centre has given her permission to attend without pay. She intends to take public transit to and from class. Paulette must decide which institution to attend and whether or not to pursue PLAR. She conducts a careful calculation of the costs associated with taking two courses and obtaining two PLAR assessments at each institution.

Student B – Tracey Trad (traditional student)

Tracey also wants to be a part-time student in a full-time Early Childhood Education program. She is in a position to take two courses each semester. She must find a daycare facility for her two-year-old daughter and her employer, a large social service agency has agreed to support the cost of her ECE training by granting her permission to attend during work hours. Before making a decision, Tracey also calculates the costs of obtaining her courses through enrolling in courses at each institution.

Paulette's and Tracey's costs to obtain their four courses are summarized in Table 19.

74

TABLE 19

Average Course Costs for Paulette (PLAR Learner) Compared to Average Course Costs for Tracey (Traditional Student) in 1996/97

Institution	Learner/ student	Tuition Fees	PLAR Assessment Fees	Total Learner/ Student Costs	Total Courses Acquired	Average Cost Per Course
College Ahuntsic*	Paulette	180.00	180.00	360.00	4	90.00
	Tracey	360.00	0	360.00	4	90.00
College of the North Atlantic	Paulette	368.00	100.00	468.00	4	116.00
	Tracey	735.00	0	735.00	4	184.00
Conestoga College	Paulette	309.00	140.00	449.00	4	112.00
	Tracey	618.00	0	618.00	4	155.00
Douglas College	Paulette	278.00	278.00	556.00	4	139.00
	Tracey	555.00	0	556.00	4	139.00
Fanshawe College	Paulette	320.00	140.00	460.00	4	115.00
	Tracey	639.00	0	639.00	4	160.00
Mohawk College	Paulette	298.00	140.00	438.00	4	109.00
	Tracey	596.00	0	596.00	4	149.00
Red River College	Paulette	392.00	112.00	504.00	4	126.00
	Tracey	784.00	0	784.00	4	196.00

These calculations are: limited to direct costs to the learners and include tuition and course materials and supplies. They do not include lost wages, vacation time, daycare or transportation costs; the costs are based on calculations of two prior learning assessments per PLAR learner and two 45 hour courses.

* The example figures for College Ahuntsic are drawn from their Instrumentation et Controle program and are typical costs of courses in part-time programs. The other colleges' figures are from their Early Childhood Education programs. In the case of Red River College, fees relate to the full-time ECE diploma program offered on a part-time basis through Continuing Education.

Observations

At five of the seven institutions, Paulette would have saved money by taking PLAR. Potential savings ranged from $39 at Mohawk College to $70 at Red River College. At College Ahuntsic, and Douglas College Paulette's costs would have been the same as if she had enrolled in all four courses. Although there is some variation on these results, they generally support the data obtained through the learner focus groups that cost saving was one of the greatest benefits of PLAR.

Overall, total fees charged to PLAR learners ranged from $360 at College Ahuntsic to $556 at Douglas College. Differences were due to variations in tuition fees and the inclusion of advising fees at one institution. Average assessment fees varied from $50 to $138 per assessment.

SUMMARY OF FINANCIAL ANALYSIS FOR 1996/97

The completion of this component of the Study was difficult in part because none of the partner institutions had ever conducted a financial analysis of PLAR and there were no precedent procedures or financial data available. There is a need to obtain a clearer sense of what PLAR costs institutions and how these costs fit within total college operations. Specifically, there is a need to consider the following facts:

- Current costs of providing non-assessment PLAR services at most partner institutions are similar to the delivery of other institutional services that do not directly generate revenues. However, PLAR may generate revenues indirectly through outreach to individuals and workplaces, marketing and counseling. It is the experience of the Study partners that PLAR does generate revenues through these mechanisms and efforts should be made to assess and expand these activities.
- The direct costs of producing a course through PLAR were lower than the direct costs of delivering a traditional course at most of the seven institutions. This supports the conclusions of Reidel (1982) although the California study reported a high percentage of standardized testing and recognition of occupational licenses for academic credit both of which are generally more economical to conduct than most prior learning assessment in Canada. Revenues generated through recognition of occupational licenses for academic credit is not practised in Canada but warrants investigation. The costs of PLAR by assessment method should also be evaluated by institutions using the historical data available in the Study database so that cost effective practices are developed and appropriate financial planning can be conducted.
- At four of the seven institutions, revenues generated by assessments exceeded direct costs of assessment or were neutral. These facts appear to present incentives for institutions to provide assessments. However, at two of the four institutions and at three additional institutions, overhead contributions from traditional course delivery were significantly higher than contributions generated by PLAR assessments. Under these circumstances, there are few if any, short-term financial benefits for institutions to provide assessments.
- Direct costs of PLAR assessment delivery were calculated by partner institutions using different combinations of cost items. This is not uncommon and is consistent with the findings of Boe and Whittaker (1992).
- Study findings with respect to indirect costs of PLAR are two-fold. First, government funding for assessment delivery do not take indirect costs of assessment into account. This should be remedied. Second, PLAR learners use institutional indirect cost items at a rate of less than one third of traditional students. The view of some colleges is that PLAR should contribute the same percentage of revenues to overhead as instructional programs. The Study partners believe that would be appropriate to attribute a lower expectation of PLAR assessment revenues. If an instructional program is expected to contribute 30% of revenues to overhead, it would be appropriate to expect PLAR assessment revenues in that program to contribute less than one third or 10% of revenues.
- Initial analysis indicates that PLAR learners obtain cost savings from PLAR. However, not all cost considerations were taken into account such as lost wages, daycare and transportation. Identifying and quantifying these items require further study before conclusions can be drawn.

It is essential that PLAR services be affordable for learners and institutions. In light of the information gathered in this Study it appears that a review of the financial arrangements supporting all PLAR activities be carefully re-visited by all institutions in conjunction with funders in order to improve PLAR's financial viability without jeopardizing access.

76

PART FOUR

FOCUS GROUPS

INTRODUCTION

Einsiedel, Brown and Ross (1996) of the University of Saskatchewan provide valuable information on conducting focus groups. Their Guide was the Study's primary source used for a discussion document prepared for the partners on the design and implementation of the focus groups. The discussion document addressed the purpose of holding the sessions, participant selection, size of the groups, remuneration, location and time, length of sessions, moderation, recording, analysis and communication methods. Based on a decision to hold one assessor focus group and one PLAR learner focus group at each institution, potential questions were drafted. Input was obtained from the partners as well as focus group specialists at Red River College and Fanshawe College and a focus group protocol was developed.

All institutional partners adopted the protocol which outlined the purpose of the focus groups, the goal of the moderator, expected outcomes of the sessions, logistical requirements, participant questions, session agenda and analysis and reporting expectations (see Appendix L). A letter of invitation was drafted by one institution and circulated for adaptation by all other partners. A simple reporting format was prepared by another partner institution and shared. The focus groups were held from January to March 1999. Each institution retained the services of a moderator who conducted the sessions, analyzed the results and prepared a report on the outcomes of each session. The three Ontario institutional partners retained the services of one moderator to economize, enhance continuity and facilitate cross-college comparisons.

Data Collection

PLAR learner participants were selected from the database's 1997/98 data. At each college, twenty learners were pseudo-randomly selected by drawing every nth name from the alphabetical list and inviting them by telephone and/or in writing (if required). An optimum number of 10 and a minimum limit of 6 participants were established for each session. If insufficient participants were identified, the selection process was repeated. If insufficient learners were available from 1997/98, data from 1996/97 were drawn from the database. PLAR learner focus group sessions were held at Conestoga College, Douglas College, Fanshawe College, and Mohawk College. College Ahuntsic, College of the North Atlantic and Red River College were unable to recruit sufficient learners and conducted individual telephone interviews as an alternative. Moderators submitted written reports on each session to the Study Co-ordinator.

Each partner selected up to twenty PLAR assessors pseudo-randomly from an alphabetical list of assessor staff. Invitations were also issued by telephone and/or in writing. Sessions were held with assessors at all seven institutions (two sessions at College Ahuntsic) and moderators submitted written reports to the Study Co-ordinator.

A selection of learner and assessor focus group reports are provided in Appendix M. Individual reports are available directly from the institutions.

The Study Co-ordinator analyzed the focus group reports from a national perspective. Responses from the PLAR learners who were interviewed by telephone were included. Comments in response to each question were grouped according to expected outcomes. The results of the focus group sessions and the outcomes from the statistical analysis were synthesized to broaden and strengthen the basis for the Study's conclusions.

A total of eight assessor focus group sessions and four PLAR learner focus groups sessions were held. Three institutions held telephone interviews with PLAR learners as an alternative to focus groups due to the unavailability of learners to participate in group sessions. A total of 65 PLAR learners from 22 programs participated in the learner focus groups and telephone interviews. Forty-five learners were female and 20 were male. Fifty assessors from 37 programs participated in the assessor focus groups. Thirty-two assessors were female and 18 were male.

DATA ANALYSIS

All participants were asked to discuss a series of questions that would provide information on the following issues:

- Why learners participated in PLAR
- What assessors thought of PLAR
- What participants thought of their PLAR experiences
- Improvements that should be made to the PLAR process

Why Learners Participated in PLAR and What They Thought about Their PLAR Experiences

Learner participation in PLAR was frequently motivated by the need to obtain or upgrade their credentials for employment purposes. Learners repeatedly referred to the need to avoid unnecessary repetition of training and to use PLAR to facilitate their efforts to confirm existing work-related knowledge and skills, obtain credentials required by changing job standards, and plan for future job uncertainty. They reported that PLAR also shortened their training programs and eased pressures by reducing course loads and freeing up time for other courses. PLAR also made it easier to obtain Canadian credentials without duplicating training.

Saving money was also an important motivator for learners at some institutions. Job-required credentials could be obtained without losing full-time employment.

Overall, learners were positive about their PLAR experiences and the results. Improved motivation, self-esteem, self-knowledge, and confidence in their own knowledge and skills were key benefits. A few participants were less philosophical about their experiences and characterized PLAR as, *"a means to an end."* One learner commented, *"It gives you the piece of paper you need in the work world"*. Participants saw most faculty as supportive of PLAR although some learners reported resistance and impatience in response to their PLAR inquiries. In some cases, learners who had experienced PLAR through part-time studies appeared to have more positive experiences than full-time day students. Most learners taking the portfolio development course, found it to be a highly rewarding experience. Most learners indicated that although there was often a serious time commitment involved in PLAR, it was worth it.

Several part-time student participants expressed frustration with the limited extent to which institutions integrated PLAR with regular programming. Restrictions on the availability of part-time programming to allow learners to complete their credentials were difficult for them to accept. Access to institutional resources such as a Learning Centre and other college services were sometimes limited.

Lack of information about PLAR was noted by participants at several institutions who had learned about it through chance conversations with other students. In one focus group, two participants were not familiar with the term PLA even though they had been through the process. They were familiar with the term "challenge" and requested clarification at the outset of the focus group session. Obtaining clear information on PLAR policies, the process and exactly what was expected of them was difficult for learners at a number of the institutions. Several learners expressed concern over the lack of feedback from assessors following assessment.

Improvements to the PLAR Process

Learners had many ideas on how to improve PLAR at their institutions. The most common recommendation was that institutions should arrange mentors - other students who had already gone through the PLAR process. Participants also suggested that PLAR be more aggressively marketed internally to students and externally to potential students and to large and small workplaces in the community. Ensuring that learners had access to clear information about PLAR in their chosen programs including course outlines and access to course instructors was a priority recommendation for several participants. Specific recommendations included:

- Designating persons in each program for adult learners to contact
- Ensuring that PLAR assessors are the faculty who teach the course and that they have work experience in the field of the assessment
- Investigating why PLAR learners want to do PLAR
- Clarifying assessor expectations prior to assessment, including timelines
- Providing feedback following assessment
- Ensuring greater consistency in applying PLAR policies and procedures
- Providing clear course outlines using learning outcomes and clearly distinguishing between course levels
- Clarifying fee policies and applying them consistently
- Providing documentation to successful PLAR learners to confirm credit awards
- Providing individual support to PLAR learners who require it

When asked what advice learners would give to PLAR learners coming in for the first time, most participants offered strong expressions of encouragement and practical advice concerning collecting evidence, consulting with faculty, contacting other students. *"Use all of your experiences. This shows that all you can do can have great importance in your life"*.

What Assessors Thought of PLAR and Their Experiences with It

The concept of PLAR was strongly supported by most assessor participants and considered an essential service of the educational system by some. Repeated references were made to PLAR's respect for adult learners, its recognition of the diversity of their experiences and needs, and its efficiency in assisting learners to achieve their training goals. Participants stated that PLAR attracted active learners and could be effectively used as a retraining and educational planning tool. One assessor noted, *"I knew we had students in our program who were doing curriculum they really didn't need to do, but there wasn't a really good vehicle for them to gain credit for it"*. Other assessors valued PLAR for its contribution to reducing training periods, accelerating job market entry and providing *"a gratifying experience for adults"*. Assessors also recognized that learners were placing value on PLAR's capacity to facilitate a return to training.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

With respect to the PLAR process used at their institutions, concerns were expressed that the institutions' general program delivery systems were not as flexible as PLAR and that this created learning barriers for PLAR learners. The flexibility of PLAR however, was highly valued, *"I find the idea (of PLAR) attractive because it means that the college is being flexible"*. Lack of demonstrated support for PLAR from faculty and management was viewed to have a negative impact on the seriousness with which PLAR is taken in some institutions. A comment that *"PLAR lives, but it lives on goodwill"* captured the views of several participants.

Some assessors felt that differences in the ways PLAR was administered within their institutions caused confusion on the part of faculty and learners. Lack of clarity around policies such as number of credits and types of courses permitted through PLAR, grading and transcription practices, assessment/tuition fee duplication and assessor remuneration surfaced during discussions. Other assessors felt that the process was quite straightforward and after their initial PLAR experience, caused little concern. One assessor felt strongly that *"high skill level or process courses shouldn't be open to challenge. We're going to tell our students that they can't although the Ministry says they can"*. Some assessors felt that PLAR was working better for continuing education students, where administrative procedures were less complex.

Assessors at one institution felt strongly that they should not be obliged to provide numeric grades for PLAR assessments and that a pass/fail designation should be used.

Assessors' views on improving PLAR were aimed at non-PLAR elements of their institutions' activities as well as PLAR practices. The most noteworthy were that recommendations that the notion of self-assessment be incorporated into programming, that general institutional policies, particularly those on exemption be revised to better complement the PLAR process with respect to fees, and that learning outcomes be used to establish criteria for assessment. Several assessors felt that additional PLAR staff training would improve the range of assessment methods used and provide faculty with tools and support to conduct assessments. Refresher courses, mentoring programs for faculty, network opportunities and improved information packages on PLAR for assessors were additional suggestions.

Participants at one institution felt that adding more structure to their PLAR services as well as written guidelines, policies, schedules and deadlines would improve services. Concern about the lack of recognition for the work of assessors led to suggestions by several participants that additional remuneration should be provided for assessment services since PLAR assessments have been added to their existing workloads. Others stated that at present volume, PLAR was being successfully integrated into the work of assessors but that if demand increased, adjustments to the remuneration system would be required. Other recommendations for improvements to PLAR included:

- Providing information packages to PLAR learners on learning and assessment expectations
- Ensuring that PLAR is less costly to learners than taking the course
- Requiring assessors to complete their own portfolios
- Providing access to computers for learners who have no computers
- Encouraging workplace acceptance of PLAR
- Implementing multiple and different assessment practices
- Creating mechanisms to facilitate assessors sharing experiences with one another
- Coaching learners up-front on how to talk about their learning
- Finding ways to assist learners to "top-up" their learning to meet course requirements
- Additional funding for PLAR services

SUMMARY AND OBSERVATIONS ON FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS

There was generally strong support for the concept of PLAR among both assessors and learners. PLAR was viewed as an "equalizer" that provided efficiencies in learners' efforts to achieve their training goals. Participants all agreed that PLAR improved self-esteem and boosted learner confidence. Learners felt the processes were rigorous but worth the result. They expressed general appreciation for the assessors who facilitated their progress and evaluated their learning. Assessors felt that PLAR's respect for adult learners was a key attribute. Assessors and learners also shared the view that greater flexibility was required in institutions' educational policies and practices if adults were to be really given the opportunity to be life long learners.

Reasons for a more positive PLAR experience by part-time learners were unclear. Is registration by course more conducive to PLAR than registration by program? Are the types of courses taken by part-time students different from courses taken by full-time students? Are there differences in approach to PLAR by faculty delivering courses to part-time learners? Are there differences in the administrative duties required of assessors? Consideration of these questions could lead to improvements in PLAR services for full-time students.

The difficulty experienced by part-time PLAR learners accessing courses to complete their credentials on a part-time basis appear to be a major source of frustration for learners. Some partner institutions observed that PLAR learners share this frustration with many part-time and full-time traditional students and that solutions lie in expanding the availability of part-time programming.

There was a shared perspective that learners and assessors need more clarity around what was expected of them in their PLAR activities and that printed materials on procedures should be produced to alleviate confusion. Some participants expressed this as a need for greater standardization of practices. Clearer expectations would help reduce inconsistencies and resulting concern about fair treatment, particularly with regard to assessment fees charged to learners. Assessors and learners also shared the view that their institutions should be more aggressive in their marketing of PLAR to current students and the external community.

The cost of PLAR to learners was a major concern to assessors. Several instances in which assessors circumvented institutional policies by not charging learners for assessments were cited. The cost of assessments was of less concern to the learners who generally, albeit not unanimously, felt that the fees were reasonable. This may be due in part to the fact that most PLAR learners in this Study paid course fees and not full-time tuition. However, the restriction of this Study to PLAR learners who had assessments, has also eliminated the possibility of obtaining input from learners who could not afford and therefore did not undertake assessment. Analysis of learner attitudes toward costs of PLAR is incomplete without data from learners for whom PLAR was not conducted due to cost.

Based on their experience and the results of this Study, the partners believe that only those learners with high motivation and perseverance are successful as the onus is on them to demonstrate their learning. The sentiment expressed by several assessor participants that PLAR lives on goodwill suggests that it is not yet a mainstream activity of institutions and that attention still needs to be paid to integrating assessment activities into every day operations including work assignments and remuneration packages.

The focus groups have provided the Study with valuable descriptions of the realities of PLAR implementation at their institutions. They have also compiled an impressive list of ideas on how PLAR services can be improved. When this qualitative data is synthesized with the Study's statistical data, the result is a clear picture of the strengths and weakness of PLAR services in Canada and a powerful tool for those who wish to take action. Institutions wishing to improve their PLAR services will benefit from their own review of the ideas generated by the Study's focus group participants. Some institutions may wish to conduct their own focus groups using the Study questions and procedures as guidelines. Participant institutions will benefit by acting on the recommendations of their learners and assessors.

PART FIVE

LIMITATIONS OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Learner/Student Data

At the outset of the Study the partners had no information on what data would be available for analysis. There was no opportunity to design the Study around specific questions. An early focus on specific areas of study would have helped in the analysis of data and presentation of results.

The Study focuses on learners who had PLAR. No information is available on the perspectives of learners or students who did not complete PLAR. The data provided through the qualitative analysis in particular, should be reviewed with this in mind.

Data collection for 1997/98 was based on a partial year for two of the seven institutions. Red River College data are complete up to April 30, 1998 (year-end June 30, 1998). Mohawk College was able to obtain data for the Fall semester of 1997/98.

Data collection on traditional students is limited to a sampling of students. Data collection on traditional students at Mohawk College is limited to courses taken within the selected programs rather than all courses taken by those students.

Information on assessment methods used at Fanshawe College was limited to challenge and portfolio assessment. Fanshawe College has been extracted from analysis affected by this limitation and noted in the relevant section of this report.

Data on programs taken by PLAR learners and traditional students with multiple program enrolments at Fanshawe College were compromised by a high number of courses unaffiliated with specific programs. This difficulty was resolved in large measure by special query designs that took the multiple enrolments into account. However the results have an estimated error factor of 5 - 10%. Fanshawe College has been extracted from the analysis of queries affected by this limitation and appropriate notations have been made in the relevant section of this report.

Data collection on program enrollments is based on academic year. In some cases, these dates do not coincide with the actual outset of learners' and students' studies as at some institutions, program enrollment takes place part-way through students' study activities.

Data analysis on PLAR learner success is limited in some instances to five institutions as College Ahuntsic and Douglas College did not record unsuccessful PLARs.

The PLAR activities of full-time and part-time students have been analyzed together in some of the queries. Analysis using more refined criteria can be conducted in future studies using the existing database.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Focus groups with PLAR learners were not possible at three locations. The change in the methodology to individual telephone interviews at these locations limited dynamics and may have affected results.

Data that appeared to be important but came from single focus group participants could not be cross-checked with other participants. This data was however cross-checked with statistical data wherever possible for corroboration.

The limitations of the financial data collection and analysis are presented in Part Three and in a detailed report in the appendices.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

INTRODUCTION

This Study represents what the partners hope is a solid foundation for credible, reliable research into prior learning assessment and recognition in Canada. The Study has not covered all aspects of PLAR that deserve attention. Neither is it complete in all areas that it does explore. However, it is a good beginning, one that adult learners, institutions and policy makers can rely on in their deliberations on future directions in educational reform.

The quantitative data in this Study provide a picture of the individuals who are accessing PLAR and of the institutional activities involved in assessment for credit and recognition. They also provide clues for future research about learners who are not accessing PLAR and the reasons for their absence. The institutional profiles provide a useful snapshot of the context in which PLAR was operating at the mid-point of the study period and the *Glance at Us Today* reports link the study period to what is happening in PLAR at the time of publication. These reports also provide a sense of the direction in which each institution will be proceeding in the future. The financial analysis of PLAR represents the first attempt ever to identify costs associated directly with PLAR services in Canadian colleges. It was the most difficult element of the Study and does not yet provide a total picture of costs. However, in the partners' view it accurately represents 1996/97 costs and revenues and reveals a critical barrier to the growth and development of PLAR - inadequate financial and institutional resources.

Through the contribution of learner and focus group participants the qualitative data reveal better than any quantitative data, the valuable role that PLAR can play in supporting adults in transition. The relationship is quite simple. The PLAR process can be an effective tool in facilitating lifelong learning and learning is at the heart of any transition. Focus group participants provided the Study with key insights into the impact of current PLAR practices on learners and institutions and many excellent ideas on how to improve services.

The synthesis of quantitative and qualitative data combined with the judgment of experienced and expert Study partners reveal that PLAR lowers the waterline on the "iceberg" of adult learning to expose learning that is often more difficult to recognize than learning acquired through traditional delivery. The results of this Study have led to the following observations about PLAR and its implications for Canadian colleges.

KEY FINDINGS

The key findings from the Study show that:

- Adult learners did have educationally relevant, college-level prior learning.

  The grades achieved by PLAR learners in courses acquired through PLAR and the success rate of 96% for all courses acquired through PLAR support this finding. It is strengthened by evidence provided directly by faculty assessors based on the knowledge and skills the PLAR learners bring to the institutions.

- Prior learning can be successfully assessed and recognized within post-secondary educational settings.

  Although the number of assessments were low in relation to the number of courses the institutions delivered through traditional means over the 5 years, academic credit for more than 10,000 courses was granted (including over 3,000 courses through evaluation of military training). In the majority of cases (65%) they were numerically graded.

- Early concerns that PLAR learners might attempt to acquire large portions of their credentials through PLAR and thereby jeopardize the legitimacy of institutions' credentials were unrealized.

  The evidence indicates that most PLAR learners undertake only one assessment and the overall average is 2.3 assessments per learner.

- PLAR strengthened adult learners' confidence in their own capacities to learn and motivated adults to pursue further education.

  The evidence provided by both assessors and learners in the focus groups supports this finding as do the views of the partner Facilitators who share many years of direct experiences with PLAR learners. The statistical evidence further indicates that PLAR learners take more courses than traditional students over the long-term (5 years).

- PLAR represented important efficiencies for adult learners particularly those who decided to return to education to achieve employment-related training and occupational credentials.

  This finding is supported by statistical evidence that part-time PLAR learners shorten their programs, reduce their course loads and save money by using PLAR. The commentary by learner focus group participants consistently referenced the advantages of PLAR for working adults including reducing pressure so that time away from work and family responsibilities is kept to a minimum.

  The need for formal credentials has become greater in recent years due to downsizing, quality assurance initiatives, changing job requirements and regulatory changes. The introduction of new technologies into some occupations may also play a part.

- PLAR learners were successful students.

  The evidence indicates that PLAR learners earned solid grades in their courses acquired through PLAR and in their courses delivered through traditional delivery. Their average course grades were as high or higher than the average course grades of traditional students in the same programs. Their pass rates were higher. They took more courses than traditional students and graduated at a higher rate. Their graduation grade point averages were slightly higher.

- A motivating factor behind support for PLAR at all participant institutions was a strong faculty-based commitment to adult learning.

  The commentary provided by faculty assessors in focus groups and the experience of the Study partners in working with faculty support this finding. A high degree of volunteerism also has been reported anecdotally.

- PLAR can be effectively used as a marketing tool to attract learners requiring training for employment or occupational certification. It is also an effective tool for marketing college programs to potential students over the age of 30 years.

  Marketing strategies to attract these two groups would increase PLAR activity levels and improve links among institutions, workplaces and occupational bodies.

Study results also suggest that:

- The low numbers of PLAR learners and programs in which PLAR was accessed, are disturbing signals that delivery of assessments in its current form has not been economical for most institutions.

  The financial analysis indicates that several institutions were providing PLAR non-assessment services at a loss. They were also delivering assessments at a substantial loss relative to the delivery of traditional courses. There are no short-term financial benefits to institutions to provide PLAR if revenues are considerably less than revenues from traditional program delivery. Those institutions funded on a basis that linked volume of assessments to revenues were in a position to improve PLAR's return on investment by increasing activity but very large increases in volume would have been required to make up the difference.

  This finding is additionally disturbing when the experienced views of College Ahuntsic regarding cost is taken into account. Since 1998/99, College Ahuntsic and all other cegeps in Quebec have begun to receive government funding for PLAR at the same level as support for part-time courses. This results in revenues over and above the cost of assessment delivery. Nevertheless, College Ahuntsic anticipates a decline in the number of assessments conducted annually because adequate resources are not being put toward training. This perspective suggests that funding which neutralizes institutions' costs of PLAR, is alone, insufficient to ensure sustainability. Faculty support for and training in the conceptual and technical aspects of PLAR are also key factors.

  The Study did not identify any long-term financial incentives to institutions to provide PLAR within the fiscal arrangements in place during the study period, particularly since most programs had full enrollment. However, this would be a worthwhile subject for future research that should include any changes that have occurred since the end of the study period.

- The policy focus on PLAR diminished at some institutions over the study period and resulted in a reduction in resources for PLAR development.

  This finding is reflected in the reductions of time and financial resources previously allocated for PLAR facilitation at several institutions. This development combined with steps to quickly integrate PLAR into day to day program operations may have resulted in a degradation of service. Targeted resources for development work at the outset of PLAR initiatives continue to be important at some of the institutions and a focus is being placed on the development of PLAR practices that include new partnerships with workplaces and occupational bodies.

- Although there are exceptions, the "new learner" who would not attend college if it were not for PLAR, may not have materialized to the extent originally anticipated.

  The Study was unable to obtain statistical data on the extent to which PLAR motivates learners to enter educational programs. It appears that many PLAR learners are existing students. This observation is supported by the Study finding that the largest single age group of PLAR learners was 20 - 24 years. Lack of "new learners" may be due in part to lack of external marketing on PLAR as noted in the focus group sessions. There has been no research in Canada on the role that PLAR plays in learners' decisions to return to formal education. This is an important subject for future research.

- Lack of agreement and clarity around remuneration for conducting assessments had a detrimental effect on learners and on faculty support for PLAR.

  The evidence gathered during this Study revealed a wide range of assessor remuneration practices within institutions; interviews and some focus group reports indicated inconsistencies in the way assessors were remunerated as well as some resentment, lack of understanding and non-compliance regarding institutional policies. Through their representatives, faculty members need to be on-board if PLAR is to become part of institutions' day to day operations.

- Further diversification of assessment practices and tools would help learners more fully demonstrate their knowledge and skills.

  Difficulties in categorizing assessments by method may have limited the Study's capacity to accurately depict the variety of practices actually used but based on their experience with faculty assessors, the partners believe there is considerable room for further diversification of assessment practices. Statistical evidence in support of this finding is the high concentration of assessments by challenge and the very low use of workplace evaluation. Although movement in some jurisdictions is toward greater flexibility in assessing learning in the classroom, the difficulties of implementing a flexible tool in an inflexible system may be at the root of PLAR's growing pains.

- Early benefits from assessor training within institutions diminished over time at some institutions due to restructuring, attrition, budget cuts and emphasis on other reform initiatives. This may have impeded the quality and quantity of assessments. There is a need for renewed emphasis on PLAR training as faculty require support to develop new assessment practices that are cost efficient and valid measurement tools.
- Opportunities for full-time learners to benefit from PLAR through shortened programs, lighter course loads or lower costs were impaired by rigid "lock step" program delivery structures that require full-time attendance, limit class scheduling and require duplication of payments by PLAR learners. This finding is supported by evidence that at most of the partner institutions, full-time learners represent less than 30% of all PLAR learners. Reductions in full-time student status resulting from PLAR also eliminate learner eligibility for government financial assistance.
- There is a need for greater public awareness of PLAR and marketing to individuals, workplaces, occupational associations and sectoral organizations.

  The low level of PLAR activity at all institutions support this finding as well as evidence provided by focus group participants some of whom made statements that they were not familiar with the term PLAR even though they had gone through assessment. Learners attending at least two of the partner institutions made these extraordinary statements. Consistent comments by both assessors and learners about the lack of information on PLAR suggest this is an area requiring further attention. The lack of assessment activity regarding evaluation of workplace training is another indicator of the need to market PLAR to business and industry.

  At some institutions, a review of current information services on institutional PLAR policies and practices for learners and faculty also may be warranted to ensure that they are up-to-date and implemented.

  Although evidence in support of this finding is provided solely by focus group participants, the level of uncertainty exhibited by assessors and learners at several institutions have led the Study partners to raise this as an issue for further investigation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the Study's key findings, the partners make the following recommendations:

Institutions

Undertake a review of PLAR services and assessment practices using the findings of this report as a basis for discussion and action to:

- Ensure that written policies and procedures are implemented and practiced by all program administrators and faculty.
- Ensure that written information on PLAR procedures as well as criteria for earning credit is readily available to learners.
- Provide PLAR training to all new, full-time and part-time faculty as well as existing faculty who conduct assessments, focusing particularly on authentic assessment practices.
- Resolve faculty concerns regarding fair and consistent assessor remuneration.
- Market PLAR vigorously with workplaces and occupational bodies to increase PLAR activities within a context of strategic partnerships in training and education.
- Review institutional PLAR facilitation practices to evaluate the impact of centralization vs integration of PLAR services.
- Integrate PLAR into educational reform activities and institutional strategic plans.

86

- Conduct research into PLAR with a view to contributing to a growing body of knowledge on the relationship between formal and informal learning and the impact of PLAR on institutions and adult learners in Canada.
- Use the Study's data collection tool to monitor and research of PLAR activity.
- Develop course registration/credit systems to facilitate flexible delivery thus allowing students with prior learning to complete programs sooner.

Public Policy Makers

Undertake a review of this report and use it as a basis for discussion and action to:

- Revise current public policy and the role of government in supporting PLAR (for example, allowing Registered Educational Savings Plan funds (RESP) to be accessed for post-secondary PLAR, and permitting PLAR learners to retain their eligibility for student assistance).
- Support PLAR and apply that support to provide funding to institutions to the same degree that traditional course delivery is supported.
- Support initiatives that promote PLAR research, assessment tool development and assessor training.
- Assist institutions to improve mechanisms for facilitating transfer of credits across institutions and provinces. For example, credits acquired through the evaluation of military training should be transferable from one province to another.

Adult Learners

Read this Study report and be aware of the benefits of PLAR to:

- Be assertive in requesting recognition for prior learning
- Reference this Study in supporting requests for prior learning recognition
- Maintain career portfolios that contain evidence of knowledge and competencies acquired outside formal learning activities
- Commit to lifelong learning, building on prior learning whenever possible.

Workplaces

Study this report with an aim to:

- Be proactive in requesting that PLAR be incorporated into training provided by educational institutions
- Maintain complete records of in-house training and participation
- Encourage the use of documented portfolio evidence for recruitment, promotion and other career opportunities
- Develop strategic partnerships with education and training providers

In summary, PLAR is an academically sound practice that contributes in important ways to adult learning. It successfully links informal learning to formal learning. It improves adults' confidence in their own knowledge and skills and it enhances the chances of continuation of learning over the long term. Based on the notion that employability is the likelihood of an individual obtaining currently available employment, PLAR contributes to many learners' employability. This Study indicates that PLAR is also a catalyst for other educational reforms such as the expansion of a learning outcomes approach to training and education and diversification of assessment practices in traditional program delivery.

Institutions' clear commitment to the notion of PLAR has meant that they have delivered services despite significant financial loss relative to traditional course delivery. The *Glance at Us Today* reports, reflect a need to examine carefully the supports currently provided for PLAR services. PLAR's future depends on adequate support from public policy makers and on the development of demand from sources external to the institutions. If PLAR has a legitimate place in improving employability and occupational competency, it will likely be through strategic partnerships between institutions and business and industry. Action is required by educational institutions, governments, business and industry to integrate PLAR into skills upgrading and new credentialing requirements. PLAR can play a critical role in assisting Canadians to complete the many transitions they face during their lifetimes. It is the hope of the Study partners that institutions and policy makers will use this report to re-examine their positions on PLAR take action to reduce barriers to learners and enhance institutional services to learners and their external communities.

In the interest of facilitating future research into PLAR, the Cross-Canada Study partnership has agreed to make available to any public post-secondary organization in Canada, the data collection tool used in this Study. It will be available for non-profit research purposes only. The partnership is also exploring the possibility of making the database available for research in PLAR and other areas of adult learning. In these ways, areas of interest not raised in this report can be independently explored and efforts to learn more about the impact of PLAR on learners and institutions can continue beyond the life of the Study.

PART SIX

STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Sandra Aarts, Fanshawe College, London, Ontario

Sandra Aarts has been a full-time faculty member at Fanshawe College since 1975. Sandra has worked in a variety of programs for youth and adults over the years. She was hired as the College's first PLAR facilitator and has held the position since 1993. Sandra's interest in recognition for prior learning has evolved over a number of years - first as a learner when she realized that her 10 years of work and study abroad resulted in acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes that were more profound than those learned in her traditional university setting. Early on, as an adult educator Sandra realized that students were being asked to repeat things they already knew and the resulting lack of motivation was then blamed on the learner. Sandra's philosophy of teaching has always been to first determine where the learner is in relation to the curriculum and to build on what the learner already knows.

Sandra is Past-President of Family and Children's Services of Elgin and has recently completed her second term on the Board of Director's of the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies. Sandra remains on the Child Welfare Training Committee of the Association and is involved with the implementation of a competency-based training program for staff and board members of Children's Aid Societies across Ontario. Sandra is an active Board member of the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA).

Deb Blower, Red River College, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Deb Blower is currently the PLA Facilitator at Red River College. She has been extensively involved in the design and implementation of PLA practices at RRC since 1983 - first in the Early Childhood Education Diploma program and since January 1995 as the college PLA Facilitator. Deb has presented workshops on PLA and training seminars at numerous provincial and national conferences, written papers and articles on PLA, is currently the Chair of the Manitoba Prior Learning Assessment Network (MPLAN) and is co-chair of RRC's PLA Committee. She has served on a national PLAR Steering Committee for the National PLAR Forum (1995, 1997, 1999). She is currently the Chair of the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA).

Deb has been extensively involved in the development of the PLAR processes and was the co-developer of a Portfolio Development course for a national Steel Industry Training Program - a joint project of Canadian Steel Trade and Employment (CSTEC) United Steel Workers of America (USWA)and 19 community colleges from across Canada. She is currently involved in a partnership with management and union of a major aerospace industry in Winnipeg in the development of a PLAR system for its employees. As a college instructor, curriculum developer and PLA practitioner for over 20 years, Deb strongly believes in the PLA process.

Roberta Burke, Mohawk College, Hamilton, Ontario

Roberta Burke is the Co-ordinator of the Credit for Prior Learning Office at Mohawk College in Hamilton, Ontario. She has an extensive background in career and educational counselling for adult learners. She is responsible for the implementation of the policies and procedures relating to PLA at her College. She has developed and delivered a portfolio development course, including a distance education package.

She was a member of the Ontario Council of Regents PLA Implementation Committee and was involved in the development and delivery of a "train the trainer" program for PLA practitioners within the Ontario community college system. Roberta received an honourary diploma from First Nations Technical Institute for encouraging implementation of PLA and improving access to post secondary education for adult learners. In addition, she has been a consultant and a trainer for PLA implementation at many post secondary institutions across Canada. Workshop topics include: Implementation of PLA, Assessment of Prior Learning, Evaluation of Workplace Training for College Equivalency, and Portfolio Development.

She has been trained by the Canadian Vocational Association (CVA) to facilitate occupational analysis for Program Review and Occupational Standards. She holds an MEd. from Brock University, a BA in Psychology from McMaster University and is a certified Life Skills Coach.

Eleanor Conlin, EdD, Conestoga College, Kitchener, Ontario

Eleanor Conlin is the PLAR Consultant and Chair of Academic Research at Conestoga College in Kitchener, Ontario. Eleanor was responsible for implementation of the cross-college PLAR system and orienting the community at large. She just recently completed a major change process from a centralized PLAR model to a decentralized model in order to integrate more fully, PLAR into the day-to-day culture of the college.

In Eleanor's current position as Chair of Academic Research, she assists with new college research and implementation, and conducts background research through the use of inquiry, focus groups, questionnaires, and interviews. Eleanor also researches system-wide issues and develops position papers on a various academic issues for the internal and external college community.

Eleanor is a founding member of both the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment and the Ontario Prior Learning Assessment Network. She is a published author for several professional journals, and a national and international workshop leader. Eleanor is a Registered Nurse and holds a B.A.S. from York University, an MEd from Central Michigan University, and a EdD from Nova Southeastern University.

Carol Ebner Howorth, Douglas College, New Westminster, British Columbia

Carol Ebner Howorth is the PLA Co-ordinator/Advisor with the Office of the Vice-President, Instruction. Her responsibilities and line of accountability expanded in the Fall of 1996 from PLAR to include institutional issues of education reform, as indicated in the college Strategic Directions.

Carol began to implement PLAR in October 1994. There are now fourteen areas of the college developing or implementing PLAR throughout the college. She also provides faculty professional development in instructional design and assessment changes that complement PLAR. This coming academic year, Carol will work with a team in the Office of the VP - Instruction to revise college policies and procedures, guide professional development activities on issues of educational reform, and develop college wide seminars with internationally recognized speakers on change in community colleges. She will also contribute to the development of an institutional corporate client development structure for the college.

Carol contributes to the BC scene in PLAR through public speaking and contributing to Ministry of Skills, Training and Labour development work. She is an active and senior member of the Provincial PLAR Co-ordinators' Working Group. In 1995 - 1996 she contributed to the writing of the ten provincial PLAR training modules that will guide PLAR implementation work in BC. Carol has a MA in Education from the University of BC and has been an employee (teaching faculty) of Douglas College for twenty-two years.

Brent Howell, College of the North Atlantic, Corner Brook, Newfoundland

Brent is currently an Associate District Administrator at the Corner Brook Campus, College of the North Atlantic. He served as a member of the Provincial PLA Project Coordinating Committee from the Fall of 1995 to Spring 1997. This Committee was established under the auspices of the Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education (Newfoundland and Labrador Council on Higher Education) to raise awareness of PLA, develop a provincial PLA policy and provide system-wide training to implement PLA.

Throughout this project, Brent was involved in the development of a Prior Learning Assessment Training Manual and a portfolio development course outline designed for use throughout the Province's public post-secondary system. Brent was also PLA Co-ordinator for Central Newfoundland Regional College prior to the restructuring of the provincial college system (1995 - March 1997). During this period he established a PLA Advisory Committee and participated in the planning and delivery of PLA orientation sessions.

Brent continues to be involved in PLA as the team leader for the PLA Implementation Committee established by the College of the North Atlantic to recommend mechanisms which will lead to the full implementation of PLA throughout the College of the North Atlantic. Brent has participated in a number of PLA training sessions. He is a strong supporter of the PLA process and is working to ensure that the process becomes a common practice throughout the College of the North Atlantic.

Ginette Lamarre, College Ahuntsic, Montreal, Quebec

Ms. Lamarre is a PLAR advisor for the client groups and companies at the Centre de Services sur Mesure at College Ahuntsic. She is also Co-ordinator for the Canadian Forces Community College Program wich includes responsibility for the certification of armed forces personnel in the military occupations to provide them with recognition toward programs at College Ahuntsic.

Ms. Lamarre began her involvement in PLAR in 1985. Since that time she had responsibility for many PLAR developmental projects for FIRAC (Fonds de l'implantation pour reconnaissance des acquis au collegial), particularly the establishment of counseling guidelines for new PLAR candidates. She has contributed to the development of two user guides for PLAR.

Ms. Lamarre has also taken on the responsibility for the training of provincial PLAR stakeholders. She has coordinated many projects for the development of PLAR assessment tools, particularly in civil engineering and in communication and the hearing impaired.

Ms. Lamarre has also served as a guest speaker at many conferences, training sessions as well as employers and professional associations.

Joy Van Kleef, Project Co-ordinator, Toronto, Ontario

Joy has worked in a variety of senior management and research positions within the provincial government of Ontario, Canada for over 20 years. She joined the Ontario Council of Regents as Co-ordinator of the PLA Secretariat in 1992 and was subsequently appointed Senior Policy Advisor. She has undertaken research, policy development and analysis on the implementation of prior learning assessment and recognition in Ontario colleges and has written a system-wide PLA policy manual. Joy has conducted PLAR workshops across Ontario, in other provinces and in other jurisdictions including the United States and Eastern Europe.

Joy is currently a consultant on prior learning assessment and recognition. She has recently conducted research on the application of PLAR in training partnerships between workplaces and post-secondary institutions and has delivered PLAR training to college faculty via the internet. Joy is also the Sponsorship Co-ordinator for the National Forum on Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition and a member of the Ontario Prior Learning Assessment Network (OPLAN) and the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA). She is also a member of a volunteer Advisory Group for the International Council of Adult Educators. Joy has an Honours BA in Political Studies from the University of Guelph and an MA in Political Studies from Queen's University.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bers, T.H., Smith, K. (1988). Focus Groups and Community College Research: Lessons from a Study of Nontraditional Students. Community College Review, vol. 15 (4), Raleigh: North Carolina State University.

Carter, R., (1994). Maximizing the Use of Evaluation Results. In Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation. (pp. 576 - 589). San Fransisco: Jossey-Bass.

Christensen, F.A. (1975). Guidelines and Procedures for the Assessment of Experiential Learning and for the Selection and Training of Field Experts. New Jersey: Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning.

Davis, L., Knapp, J. (1978). The Practice of Experiential Education. Maryland: Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning.

Einsiedel, A. Jr., Brown, L. M., Ross, F. A. (1996). How to conduct Focus Groups - A Guide for Adult & Continuing Education Managers and Trainers. Saskatoon: University Extension Press, University of Saskatchewan.

Ertmer, P. A. (1997). Common Qualitative Research Designs in Practical Research Planning and Design. Leedy, Paul. 6th ed. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Merrill.

Hoffmann, T., Lemaster, J., Flickinger, S. (1996). The Effectiveness of the Excell Program in Supporting Efficient Learning for Adults. Maryland: University of Maryland, University College. unpublished report.

Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluations. (1994). The Program Evaluation Standards — How to Assess Evaluators of Educational Programs. California: Sage Publications Inc.

Kee, J. E. (1994). Benefits-Cost Analysis in Program Evaluation. In Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation. San Fransisco: Jossey-Bass.

Knapp, J. (1976). The CAEL Project: A Case Study: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of American Educational Research Association. San Francisco.

Krueger, R. (1988). Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research. Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications.

Lawton, S. B. (1987). The Cost of Adult Continuing Education in Ontario. Toronto: unpublished report submitted to the Ministry of Education, Ontario.

Isabelle, R. (1988). Prior Learning Assessment in Quebec Colleges. In Assessing Learning A CAEL Handbook for Faculty. Maryland: Council for Adult and Experiential Learning.

Institutional Research Office. (1999). Survey of Assessed Students, Summary of Responses. unpublished paper. Douglas College, British Columbia.

Keeton, M. (1974). Reflections on Experiential Learning and Its Uses. Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning.

Keeton, M. (1980). What Next in Assuring Quality in Experiential Learning? In M. T. Keeton (Ed.), New Directions for Experiential Learning: Defining and Assuring Quality in Experiential Learning (No. 9). San Fransisco: Jossey-Bass.

Merriam, S. B., Simpson, E. L. (1984). A Guide to Research for Educators and Trainers of Adults. Florida: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company.

Ontario Council of Regents, (1996) PLA Assessments 1993-94 and 1994-95.

Phillips, J. J. (1997). Return on Investment in Training and Performance Improvement Programs. Improving Human Performance Series. Texas: Gulf Publishing Company.

Rankin, G. E. (1994). Research Methodology: A Guide to the Experimental Research Practicum. Fort Lauderdale: Nova Southeastern University.

Riedel, J.E. (1992). Analysis of the Cost Effectiveness of Awarding Experiential Leaning Credit at Coastline Community College. Research Report No 19. unpublished report.

Robson, C. (1993). Real World Research - A Resource for Social Scientists & Practitioner-Researchers. Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers Inc.

Sharon, A. (1977). Assessing Occupational Competencies - A CAEL Handbook. New Jersey: Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning.

Sharon, A. (1975). A Task-based Model for Assessing Work Experience. New Jersey: Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning.

Sheckley, B., Warner, J. (1983). Budgeting for Experiential Learning Assessment Programs. In T. McTaggart (ed.), New Directions for Experiential Learning: Cost-effective Assessment of Prior Learning (No. 9). San Fransisco: Jossey-Bass.

Stewart, D. W., Shamdasani, P. N. (1990). Focus Groups - Theory and Practice. Applied Social Research Methods Series, vol. 20. Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications.

Swift, J. S. Jr. (1995). The Economics of Recognizing Prior Learning in a Baccalaureate Degree Program for Adults. paper presented at the Annual Meeting of ASHE. Chicago: 1995.

Wholey, J. S., Hatry, H. P., Newcomer, K. E. (1994). Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation. San Fransisco: Jossey-Bass.

Willingham, W.W. (1976). Implementing a Program for Assessing Experiential Learning. New Jersey: Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning.

Worther, B.R., Sanders, J. R., Fitzpatrick, J. L. (1997) Program Evaluation - Alternative Approaches and Practical Guidelines. New York: Longman Publishers.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A — GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Administrative fees – Fees, other than assessment fees paid by PLAR candidates to institutions for PLAR services.

Age categories – Age categories used in the Study are:

1. 18 - 19
2. 20 - 29
3. 30 - 39
4. 40 - 49
5. 50 - 59
6. 60 or more
7. Not available

Assessment – A process of developing, delivering and evaluating prior learning.

Assessment fee – A fee paid by a PLAR candidate.

Assessment Method – A procedure used to identify and measure prior learning. The assessment methods recorded in this Study are the primary methods used. Additional methods may have been used in some cases at some institutions.

Assessor – A person who assesses prior learning for college credit. In most cases, an assessor is the faculty who normally teaches the course.

Cegep – Colleges of General and Professional Education, public post-secondary institutions in the Province of Quebec that provide diploma and certificate programs ranging from less than one year to three years in length.

Challenge – A written examination prepared by faculty, often supervised by an invigilator.

Continuing Education Courses – Credit or non-credit courses taken by students attending an institution on a part-time basis.

Contract Training – Training activities undertaken by institutions in contract with workplaces. These activities may have PLAR components.

Contribution to overhead – The portion of revenues used to pay for indirect program costs and general institutional cost items such as utilities, information systems, building maintenance, capital costs, senior management.

Course – A unit of study leading to a post-secondary diploma or certificate.

Credit – A measured unit of recognized learning. A course may have one or more credits.

Credential – A qualification earned at a college/cegep including, attestation (1 – 1½ years), certificate (1 year), citation (1½ years), two-year diploma, three-year diploma or post-diploma certificate.

Demonstration – A performance completed by an individual learner and witnessed by the assessor. It includes but is not limited to structured interviews, product assessments, role-plays, simulations, presentations, and oral examinations.

Direct costs – Costs associated directly with the delivery of assessment and training including instruction, instructional materials and supplies.

Discipline – A general subject-area of study that incorporates several programs.

Applied Arts
Applied Sciences
Business
General Studies
Health Services
Human Services
Technology
Science
Other

Facilitator – A person designated by the institution to co-ordinate all PLAR activities including research, training, orientation, marketing and possibly assessing.

Faculty/Staff PLAR training – Training and orientation activities to improve college personnel's familiarity, knowledge and skills with respect to PLAR.

Focus Group – A small group of individuals brought together to discuss selected topics and provide their perspectives, attitudes and opinions. Sessions are lead by a moderator and recorded and analyzed against pre-established objectives.

Gender – Female, Male, Not Available

Indirect cost – Costs of training and assessment that are indirectly incurred by an institution.

Institutional profile – An overview of the colleges/cegep in terms of size, programs, policies and procedures and PLAR activities.

Instructional costs – Costs directly incurred by an institution to deliver training including faculty salary and benefits.

LCC Alpha designation – The alpha identifier assigned to learners for the purpose of the Study.

College Ahuntsic – A
Conestoga – C
Douglas – D
Fanshawe – F
Mohawk – M
North Atlantic – N
Red River – R

Learning – Acquired knowledge, skills and attitudes that result in a change in behavior.

Learning outcome – A description of what a learner should know and be able to do in order to be granted academic credit.

Mastery – Douglas College – successful completion of 100% of course/program requirements. Red River College – successful completion of at least 80% of course/program requirements.

Military training assessment – Assessment of in-house military training programs to determine their equivalency to college courses that could lead to college credits.

Non-salary expenses – Costs associated with the direct support of the PLAR Facilitator and Facilitator's Office. Items varied slightly by institution but may have included materials and supplies, postage, photocopying, telephone, professional development and travel.

Non-successful PLAR – Courses unsuccessfully attempted through PLAR but resulted in no credit for reasons of withdrawal, incompletion or failed assessments.

PLAR administrative support – Clerical and administrative personnel working directly with the PLAR Facilitator

PLAR learner – An individual who had at least one prior learning assessment.

PLAR orientation – Receipt of information on PLAR by way of group session, telephone interview, individual interview, video, or PLAR information package.

Portfolio – An organized collection of materials developed by a learner, which records and verifies learning achievements and relates them to educational requirements.

Portfolio assessment – The evaluation of the documented learning in a portfolio against the required learning of college/cegep courses.

Portfolio development – A portfolio developed by learners for credit through classroom, distance learning or advisory structures

Prior learning assessment and recognition – A process of identifying and measuring learning acquired outside known public educational institutions for recognition through academic credit.

For the purposes of this Study, PLAR does not include formal transfer of credit mechanisms.

Program – An approved group of related post-secondary credit courses leading to a college certificate, diploma or Declaration of Academic Achievement.

Standardized test – A written test that has been tested for its reliability and validity over time.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Student status – The status of a student.

College Ahuntsic
Full-time – the learner was enrolled in courses that constituted not less than 60% of a full course load per semester.
Part-time – the learner was enrolled in courses that constituted less than 60% of a full course load per semester.

College of the North Atlantic
Full-time – the learner was enrolled in courses that constituted not less than 18 hours per week.
Part-time – the learner was enrolled in courses that constituted less than 18 hours per week.

Conestoga College, Fanshawe College, Mohawk College
Full-time – the learner was enrolled in courses that constituted not less than 66.6% of a full course load per semester.
Part-time – the learner was enrolled in courses that constituted less than 66.6% of a full course load per semester.

Douglas College
Full-time – the learner was enrolled in courses that constituted not less than 80% of a full course load per semester.
Part-time – the learner was enrolled in courses that constituted less than 80% of a full course load per semester.

Red River College
Full-time – the learner was enrolled in courses that constituted not less than 60% of a full course load per semester.
Part-time – the learner was enrolled in courses that constituted less than 60% of a full course load per semester.

Successful completion of assessment – The granting of college credit as a result of assessment.

Traditional college academic activities – All academic activities involved in the delivery of a college program including instruction, advising and evaluation of learning.

Traditional student – An individual enrolled in a college course or program who has not had a prior learning assessment.

Tuition – A fee paid by a student to take a course or program.

Workplace training evaluation – An evaluation of in-house workplace training programs to determine their equivalency to college courses that could lead to college credits.

APPENDIX B — MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDINGBETWEEN COLLEGE OF
THE NORTH ATLANTIC

AND
COLLEGE AHUNTSIC

AND
MOHAWK COLLEGE

AND
CONESTOGA COLLEGE

AND
FANSHAWE COLLEGE

AND
RED RIVER COLLEGE

AND
DOUGLAS COLLEGE

KNOWN AS THE CROSS-CANADA PARTNERSHIP ON PLAR

Whereas:

The above-noted parties are a partnership established to conduct a Cross-Canada Study on PLAR;

Be it resolved that:

The partners acknowledge that their organizational objectives are complementary in the area of providing prior learning assessment and recognition to adult learners. All partners agree to collaborate to conduct research into PLAR at their institutions and across partner institutions;

Specific activities:

The partners shall apply jointly to Human Resources Development Canada for the funding of a research study on PLAR. Conestoga College of Applied Arts and Technology shall sign the agreement with HRDC and assume the responsibility of managing partner of the finances of the study, including the hiring of Joy Van Kleef as the co-ordinator of the study. Conestoga College will sign an agreement with Joy Van Kleef to co-ordinate the study. All partners will participate in the study in accordance with the activities outlined in the Phase One Report.

Dr. Ron Sparks
President
College of the North Atlantic

Date ____________________

Bernard Morin
Director of Studies
College Ahuntsic

Date ____________________

Shelagh Gill
Vice President, Academic
Mohawk College

Date ____________________

Dr. Grant McGregor
Dean, Academic Research and
Educational Services
Conestoga College

Date ____________________

Terry Boyd
Dean, Health Sciences, Human
Services and General Studies
Division
Fanshawe College

Date ____________________

Ken Webb
Vice President, Academic
Red River College

Date ____________________

Dr. N. John McKendry
Vice President, Instruction
Douglas College

Date ____________________

100

APPENDIX C — AUTHORSHIP AGREEMENT

Cross-Canada Study on Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition

Authorship Agreement

Signed participation in this Study reflects agreement with the following terms:

1. This Study will result in the publication of one report.
2. The authors of the report will be the following individuals on the condition that they are still with the project at the time of its completion: Sandra Aarts, Deb Blower, Roberta Burke, Eleanor Conlin, Carol Ebner, Brent Howell, Ginette Lamarre and Joy Van Kleef. In the event that a partner leaves the project before the Study is complete but after their data is submitted, their college will be acknowledged as a participating institution.
3. The authors will have sole, equal "ownership" and "authorship" of the report. The report will list the authors as a group, in alphabetical order. No other person/organization may publish the report or portions of the report without the permission of the authors.
4. The report will include a biography section at the end that will reference each author and acknowledge Dr. Merl Wahlstrom as special advisor to the project.
5. Decisions regarding publication of the report will be made by the partnership.
6. Following completion of this Study, any of the authors are at liberty to write and publish other additional reports or articles under their own authorship, using data collected in this Study. However, individual authors' reports will acknowledge this study and its authors by footnote and/or bibliographic reference. The Study will be considered complete when the final report is submitted to HRDC.
7. During the Study, the partners and the advisors will treat the activity, data collection and analysis in this Study as confidential. Information will not be released during the Study without the expressed agreement of all the partners.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

APPENDIX D — ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

Daniela DiBartolo

Daniela DiBartolo is a senior policy analyst with the Human Resources Partnerships Directorate at Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC). Since 1993, she has been involved in a range of projects for the federal government to raise awareness and to promote the further development of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition across Canada.

She is an advisor on issues related to PLAR for HRDC and has provided expertise on several projects for national sector councils as well as lending support for pan-Canadian research projects related to PLAR. Among her projects, Daniela was the chairperson for the first National Forum in PLAR in 1995 hosted by HRDC and has been a member of the Steering Committee for the subsequent conferences hosted by the Canadian Labour Force Development Board (CLFDB).

Rick A. Dedi

Rick Dedi is the Executive Director of the newly established Prior Learning Assessment Centre in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Prior to taking this position, Rick served as Director of the Colleges Secretariat, the branch of the Manitoba Department of Education and Training responsible for community college affairs, funding and program development.

Rick has been involved intensively in community college and post-secondary reforms in Manitoba over the last decade. He has served as Executive Assistant to the President at Red River College, Secretary to the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Community College Governance, Project Manager for the Province's Community Colleges (incorporation) Initiative, and was responsible for the development and drafting of The Colleges Act (1991) and the Council on Post-secondary Education Act (1996).

Rick came to Manitoba in 1985 from the Northwest Territories were he was responsible for a variety of regional development and training initiatives. He views prior learning assessment and recognition as an essential and long overdue feature of an effective and responsible employment transition and post-secondary education system for all Canadians.

Mia Gordon

Mia Gordon is currently Vice President, College Development and Senior Administrator at the David Lam Campus and Thomas Haney Center, at Douglas College, New Westminster, British Columbia. Mia is also a doctoral candidate at Nova Southeastern University, Florida, USA

In her capacity as Vice President, Mia is responsible for six major functional areas: Institutional Research and Planning; Human Resources; Center for Learning and Development; Communications and Marketing Office; the Community and Contract Services Department; Educational Liaison and Community liaison, especially with the K-12 system.

She has worked with Douglas College since 1984, as Dean of Labour Relations and College Development, as a Dean for Educational and Student Services, as Director of Student Services and Developmental Education and as a Counsellor. Actively involved in the facilitation of PLA pilot projects at Douglas College over the past five years, including chairing a cross college PLA taskforce for two years, Mia has been a member of advisory committees to several provincial PLA projects, and has worked with our internal P.D. Committee to design and facilitate PLA workshops and seminars for college employees.

Gilles Lavoie

Gilles Lavoie is responsible for training in 22 technical programs at College Ahuntsic. He also coordinates the activities for the Centre de services sur mesure and for the Programmes d'atudes des Forces canadiennes (Canadian Armed Forces) at the college. He has been actively involved in prior learning assessment and recognition since 1985.

Mr. Lavoie has had administrative responsibility for the development of many PLAR projects at the college as well as providing support for PLAR projects carried out by other groups and organizations.

He has extensive experience in teaching, professional development, administration of teaching services and carrying out management activities in a college network. Mr. Lavoie sits as chair of several committees, most notably the Commission des affaires pedagogiques (CAP) and the Comite permanent de l'Education des adultes de la CAP a la Federation des cegeps.

Douglas Myers

Douglas Myers has been Executive Director of the PLA Centre in Halifax, Nova Scotia since June, 1996. Most of his career has been spent in university continuing education at Dalhousie University where he was Dean of Henson College of Public Affairs and Continuing Education from 1986-94.

Born in Toronto, Douglas completed his doctorate at Edinburgh University and taught at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, before retiring to the land of his foreparents. He has participated in, studied and written about efforts to shift the political economy of higher education, with particular reference to adult learning and social change; to improve and sustain Canadian studies and support for cultural industries; and to develop self-employment/micro-enterprise training as a key component of regional and community development.

Robert Rideout

Robert Rideout is currently Director of Finance and Support Services with College of the North Atlantic, Newfoundland's public college system. Prior to this appointment, he was Director of Finance and Administration with Lewisporte-Gander School District No. 6 (a K-12 school system) for eight years.

Prior to his experience with the education sector, Robert worked with Newfoundland Power in a number of different functional areas, including Management Information Systems and Rates. He has extensive experience in costing, methodologies and information systems. Robert has a B. Comm (Honours) and MBA from Memorial University.

Merl Wahlstrom

Professor Wahlstrom is currently the Chair of the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. He is a registered psychologist, and has an Alberta teaching Certificate and PhD. from the University of Alberta.

Professor Wahlstrom's areas of specialization are: student program evaluation, application of technology and research to curriculum, and adaptive instruction. He has conducted program evaluations for organizations such as Via Rail, Insurance companies and major banks, and has written books and journal articles primarily on evaluation of student achievement, program evaluation and school structure implications.

Paul Zakos

Paul is currently manager of PLAR and Program Development at First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI) on the Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory. He has been on a secondment to FNTI from Loyalist College since 1986. He has been actively involved in adult education, program and policy development, training and human resource development for twenty-six years. He has designed and implemented education and training materials for adults in formal education settings and the workplace and has acted as an advisor for the development and implementation of federal and provincial policy in relation to prior learning assessment and recognition.

Paul has been a member of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) since 1986 and is a founding director (1994) and current President of the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA). He has a M.Ed. Adult Education, University of Toronto and is currently a Doctoral candidate.

APPENDIX E — INSTITUTIONAL PROFILES

Cross-Canada Study on PLAR Institutional Profiles – 1996/97

Institution Name	Ahuntsic	Conestoga	Douglas	Fanshawe	Mohawk	North Atlantic	Red River
Founded	1967	1967	1970	1967	1966	1963	1938
Location	Montreal, Quebec	Kitchener, Ontario	New Westminster, British Columbia	London, Ontario	Hamilton, Ontario	St. John's Newfoundland District 7	Winnipeg, Manitoba
Student Enrolment	6,496 full-time 2,500 part-time	5,629 full-time 31,700 part-time***	3,359 full-time 53,366 part-time 16,664 part-time non-credit	12,436 full-time 33,868 part-time***	16,071 full-time 48,185 part-time***	6,548 full-time 4,519 part-time	6,200 full-time 24,000 part-time
Fields of Study	General Studies Human Studies Sciences, Technology	Access and Preparatory Studies, Health Sciences and Community Services; Business; Engineering Technology;	Child, Family Community Studies; Commerce and Business Admin.; Health Sciences; Humanities & Social Sciences; Language, Literature and Performing Arts; Applied Sciences and Technology	Applied Arts and Business; Health Sciences; Human Services; General Studies; Technology	Applied Arts and Access; Business; Health Sciences and Human Services; Engineering Technology	Applied Arts; Business Information; Engineering Technology; Health Sciences; Industrial Trades; Academic/Access	Business and Applied Arts; Applied Sciences; Business; Community Services; Developmental Education and Continuing Education; Health; Technology; Aboriginal Education and Institutional Diversity
Number of Programs	30	66 full-time 43 part-time	54	93 full-time 44 part-time	72 full-time 65 part-time	49	65 full-time 51 part-time
Full-time Staff	599	526	559	865	779	305	750
# of Campuses	1	4	3	5	4	49	7
Tuition Fees by Program	None	$1592.72		$1,592.72	$1,592.72	$1,200	$1,079
Tuition Fees by by Course	None	$157.50	$46.25 per credit*	$157.50	$157.50 (42 hours)	$150	$196++
Total Budget	$36 M	$51 M	$46 M	$87 M	$87 M	$32 M	$57 M
PLAR Start Date	1985	1993	1994	1994	1986	1993/94	1980
Assessments Completed	1993/94 - 75 1994/95 - 314 1995/96 - 769 1996/97 - 534 1997/98 - 90	1993/94 - 14 1994/95 - 88 1995/96 - 107 1996/97 - 114 1997/98 - 124+	1993/94 - 25 1994/95 - 129 1995/96 - 192 1996/97 - 399 1997/98 - 182	1993/94 - 3 1994/95 - 40 1995/96 - 135 1996/97 - 131 1997/98 - 218	1993/94 - 458 1994/95 - 425 1995/96 - 431 1996/97 - 407 1997/98 - 134+	1993/94 - 212 1994/95 - 20 1995/96 - 24 1996/97 - 36 1997/98 - 18	1993/94 - 519 1994/95 - 384 1995/96 - 386 1996/97 - 438 1997/98 - 330+

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Institution Name	Ahuntsic	Conestoga	Douglas	Fanshawe	Mohawk	North Atlantic	Red River
Assessment Fees	$2.00 per course hour	$70 per course	$46.25 per credit to a maximum of 9 credits**	Up to $70 per course	$70 per course	$50 per course	$50 per portfolio assessment; $50/challenge max. of $150 per course; $25/hour for practical tests to a max. of $150 per assessment plus cost of materials costs
PLAR Funding Sources	Provincial Ministry, Assessment fees	Provincial Ministry, Assessment fees	Provincial Government, College, Assessment fees	Provincial Ministry, Assessment fees	Provincial Ministry, Assessment fees	Provincial Government, Assessment fees	Provincial Government, Assessment fees
Formal PLAR Policies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
PLAR Committee	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
PLAR Staff	5 part-time advisors	1 full-time Co-ordinator, 1 part-time support staff	1/2-time Co-ordinator	1 full-time Facilitator, 1 part-time Administrative Assistant	1 full-time Facilitator, 1 part-time Administrative Assistant	1 half-time Co-ordinator	1 full-time Facilitator, 1 part-time Administrative Assistant
PLAR Office	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
PLAR Expenditures	$30,000	$93,155	$30,000	$104,789	$115,000	$15,000	$62,878
Basis for Assessment	Course-based	Course-based	Course-based	Course-based	Course-based	Course-based	Course-based
PLAR Professional Development	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Assessor Compensation	Part of normal workload plus contracts for evaluations	$50 per hour to a maximum of 2 hours	$100 per assessment with discretion to pay for comprehensive assessments	Incorporated into workload; Part-time were paid on an hourly basis	Fee payment	$25.00 per hour	Part of normal workload; Con Ed and Distance Ed. receive $25/hr.
PLAR Orientation	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	As required	Yes
PLAR Availability	All programs	All programs	All programs	All programs	All programs	5 programs	All programs

---

* Douglas College courses average 3 credits per course but range from 2 to 12 per course.
** Douglas College does not charge assessment fees for awards over 9 credits.
*** These figures represent annual course enrolments.
+ Number of assessments in 1997/98 are partial statistics for Conestoga College Mohawk College, and Red River College
++ Based on a 40-hour part-time course

APPENDIX F — GLANCE AT US TODAY REPORTS 1998/99

COLLEGE AHUNTSIC

Institutional Size, Student Enrollment and Fields of Study

Since 1985, Ahuntsic College has been innovative in the area of prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR). Since 1996-97, few important changes have taken place with regards to the number of students enrolled at the College in full-time study or continuing education on a part-time basis.

Financial Status

The financing of PLAR has evolved and it is now firmly established that cegeps receive the same funding for conducting assessments as they do for the delivery of part-time courses. Revenues in excess of the costs of delivery of assessments are applied to PLAR training and assessment tool development. The Ministry of Education of Quebec offers little targeted financing for special projects or assessment tool development. Assessment fees remain at $2.00 per course-hour. The institutional policy is that PLAR must be available to any person enrolled in one of the College's programs. Experienced teachers continue to handle PLAR requests with the means currently in place (e.g. examination of the professional files, interviews, a demonstration tests). However, in the future PLAR services will be less readily available, due to the lack of resources to provide new teachers training and to raise their awareness of PLAR. This is true as much at the provincial level as at the local level.

PLAR Activities

Through the Customised Educational Services Centre, College Ahuntsic tries to sensitize the business community to the importance of assessing the academic potential and competencies of their personnel before they develop training plans. Some program areas of the College continue to develop PLAR services for specific groups with specific needs.

For example, PLAR in the Ambulance technician program continues to evolve. A new assessment procedure will be carried out with ambulance technicians at Urgences Santé in the Montreal area who were on the job before the current training program offered by the college began. The assessment will be followed by specific training activities that focus on the specific needs of the individuals. This approach will contribute to maintain a high level of competency of the ambulance technician[illegible] currently on the job.

Still in the same program, a group of eight military medical assistants recently underwent a similar procedure following the accreditation of their occupation with the College's ambulance technician program. The Armed Forces personnel of CFB Bagotville received 400 hours of training (spread over 6 months) to complete the collegial studies attestation programme of 840 hours. The military students passed and will receive certification to work as ambulance technicians in Quebec. A new group of 16 Armed Forces personnel of the Valcartier base are enrolled in the same program scheduled for February 2000.

College Ahuntsic has been working since 1986 with the Canadian Armed Forces on the accreditation of military trades. Roughly ten trades are assessed every year; others are re-evaluated according to requests from the Department of National Defence.

Future Directions

College Ahuntsic remains an active participant in the development of PLAR services in view of an ever-growing number of tasks associated with this practice and in spite of a reduction in budgetary and human resources. For the College, PLAR is a pedagogical activity wholly integrated with the continuing education services offered to adults.

COLLEGE OF THE NORTH ATLANTIC

Institution Size, Student Enrolment and Fields of Study

College of the North Atlantic is Newfoundland and Labrador's public College. The College was formally amalgamated in April of 1997 at which time the five regional colleges were merged to form one public college. The full- and part-time student enrolment at College of the North Atlantic is approximately 12,000, making it one of the largest post-secondary educational and skills training centers in Atlantic Canada. The faculty and support staff employed by the College totals 1,100. The College operates 18 campus locations and offers over 70 full-time programs and more than 300 part-time courses. Program areas at the College include: Academic/Access, Applied Arts, Business, Engineering Technology, Health Sciences, Industrial Education/Trades, Information Technology and Natural Resources. In addition, the College provides customized training to a wide variety of clients and has an active Marketing and International office, which serves the needs of clients world-wide.

Financial Status

The operating budget for the College is approximately $70 million. Funding for College operations is provided by the provincial government and is also generated through external contracts with various agencies requesting specific training. The delivery of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition services is funded through the College's budget and, since PLAR services are fully integrated in the delivery of other student services, there is no specific budget for PLAR. Students who pursue PLAR challenges are required to pay a $50.00 fee for each challenge. Full-time students are not required to make double payments. The provincial government does not provide funds specifically destined for PLAR implementation.

PLAR Activities

College of the North Atlantic adopted a policy for Prior Learning Assessment in June of 1998. This policy provides students with every opportunity to receive credit for past learning experiences through a comprehensive, systematic process of evaluation. The College's policy includes a 25% residency requirement. Students attending College of the North Atlantic have access to PLAR at each of the College's 18 locations.

In addition to a PLAR policy, the College has developed administrative support materials/handbooks for assessors, and is currently involved in the development of a training package for PLAR assessors.

Since the amalgamation of the College, efforts have been underway to increase the accessibility of PLAR services to learners by making PLAR an integrated part of other student services provided by the College. In order to facilitate the implementation process, a PLAR Committee was formed. This committee is made up of faculty, administration, student services representative(s), and the Director of Student Services who is responsible for the College-wide implementation of PLAR. This Committee meets several times per year, or as required.

During the past year, requests for access to PLAR services have increased, and will quite likely continue to do so as students become aware of the benefits of PLAR challenge.

Future Directions

College of the North Atlantic is dedicated to providing quality programming and to maximizing access opportunities for students who wish to avail of training. In light of changing demographics and increasingly rapid technological change, the continued availability of PLAR challenge remains an important part of the College's philosophy. The College's Prior Learning Assessment policy, as well as various related procedures, will be revisited and adjusted on a regular basis in order to provide all reasonable opportunities for the acknowledgment of prior learning opportunities.

The College's delivery of PLAR services will, no doubt, be examined in an effort to ensure consistent PLAR services are available at each of the 18 campus locations. In addition, there will be further examination of the professional development needs of individuals involved in the provision of PLAR services.

The future will also include a closer review of the services available to PLAR learners who have acquired considerable skills through specific industrial work experiences. A growing number of these individuals will likely avail of opportunities for skill enhancement. It will be important to ensure that appropriate mechanisms are in place to provide reasonable credit for past skills acquisition while, at the same time ensuring program credibility and quality assurance. The development of such procedures will require close liaison with appropriate industry representatives.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

CONESTOGA COLLEGE OF APPLIED ARTS AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Size, Student Enrollment and Fields of Study

Conestoga College has continued both downsizing and restructuring since 1996 to strengthen its fiscal position. Despite this, we have been able to maintain enrollment levels at 5,429 full time students and 31,399 part time students respectively. A new Information Technology Centre was opened in September 1999 which greatly expands our capability and capacity for high tech programming.

Financial Status

PLAR continues to be funded through provincial ministry grants and assessment fees. The funding unit has been reduced by approximately $400. The 100 assessments equal to 1 funding unit formula has remained unchanged. The assessment fee is now tied to continuing education fee schedule and is $85 per assessment for the 1998-99 academic year. The Ministry of Education and Training has granted colleges discretion to set fees anywhere below the ceiling of $85.00. Feedback from PLAR students and assessors indicate that this 21.43% increase in fees since 1996 is becoming a problem for both full time and part time students. Assessment fees are scheduled to increase a further 5% to $89 per assessment for the 1999/2000 academic year. At the time of writing, the college is reviewing this proposed increase.

PLAR Activities

With the discontinuance in April 1996 of provincial funding for the PLAR facilitator positions, it was decided by the college to decentralize PLAR and integrate it into the everyday life activity of college divisions. It was a decision based upon fiscal concerns and the integrative organizational model being used by the college. An implementation plan was developed by the PLAR Advisory Committee and approved by senior management. The implementation process extended over one academic year and was completed by end of September 1997. The process included revised registration and customer service procedures; extensive training in both academic and service departments; an employee handbook organized with general PLAR information, specific department procedures and processes, flowcharts and glossary; frequently asked questions with answers for students, service providers and assessors; and new marketing materials. The resources supporting the designated PLAR office, staffing was discontinued and the budget reallocated. The PLAR Advisory Committee was disbanded.

As of September 1997, the Chair of Academic Research and Educational Services and former PLAR Facilitator, assumed the responsibility for resolving outstanding issues related to PLAR and orientating new college employees about PLAR. She continues however, to act as the PLAR Consultant for matters external to the college.

There have been relatively few PLAR problems since integration. Moving to a decentralized model has not had any negative impact on numbers. In fact, the number of PLAR assessments continues to grow slowly.

As a direct result of the focus group reports, the PLAR Steering Committee was recalled to work through the issues raised and to review the policies, practices, and procedures. Recommendations for change will be approved by senior management and will be implemented during the fall of 1999. The employee handbook will be revised to reflect the changes.

Future Directions

Conestoga College has always been interested in quality service and quality education. For this reason, in 1998, it embarked on the journey to ISO 9001 certification. The findings of this cross Canada report will be circulated to each of the School Deans and Service Department Managers for review. Where appropriate, the report will serve as a catalyst for further change and enhancements. One such example would be the target marketing of PLAR to older adults and specifically to the male population. Another example would be to expand PLAR services to the workplace. Both of these strategies should result in increased PLAR activity.

Conestoga College will continue to look for opportunities to improve services and to increase access to post secondary education for adults with varying amounts of experiential learning. But, it will have to be within very strict financial constraints. The findings in this study will serve however, as a blueprint for future quality enhancements.

DOUGLAS COLLEGE OF APPLIED ARTS & TECHNOLOGY

Institution Size, Student Enrolment and Fields of Study

In 1998 - 1999, Douglas College had 3480 full time students, 5781 part time students, and 14,234 non-FTE continuing education students. As well, we had 1009 international enrolments. Of a total of 892 employees, there were 469 faculty. In the Instruction Division, there were six Faculties (departments): Commerce and Business Administration, Health Sciences, Humanities and Social Sciences, Language, Literature and Performing Arts, and Science and Technology. We also had a Department of Student Development that included preparatory programs, developmental studies, and English as a Second Language.

Financial Status

Our operating budget for 1998-1999 was $48,674,000. In addition we had a development budget of approximately $1,000,000 and raised revenue of $2,500,000 from ancillary sources. Our tuition fees continued to be frozen at 1995-96 levels under a provincial mandate and this was increasingly an issue for college revenue generation. This means that the 1995 PLAR tuition fee of $46.25 per credit remained. Our 9-credit cap also remained in place and this is also a problem for financial viability of PLAR.

In this year we also saw increased use of college resources to develop and implement PLAR across the College. Approximately $350,000 was spent on PLAR development from internal funds. The provincial government continued to contribute resources towards PLAR development ($20,000) through the PLA Implementation Grant. 1998-1999 was the first year of a formal mandate that PLAR would be developed and offered on a college - wide basis and the PLAR personnel was expanded to include other faculty seconded to support the development and implementation of PLAR.

PLAR Activities

We had considerable growth in PLAR services this year. On a policy level, we have a Residency Subcommittee of our Education Council that considers requests for exemption of our 50% residency limit. No request for policy exemption of a PLAR student has yet been denied. This policy will be reviewed in the coming year. On an operations level, we expanded PLAR to five new programs in the College and created a college-wide PLAR Service Team consisting of key change agents from education technology, PLAR, learning outcomes and our PLAR Service. This change team prioritizes and guides development of PLAR and related educational reforms. Most of the funding for operations was received from a college-wide Strategic Directions Fund, which was created to further development for our college's Strategic Directions.

We officially linked education technology, learning outcomes and PLAR through the PLAR Service Team. An important related development was the beginning of a document of college-wide (student graduate) abilities and graduate profiles for all college credentials. We also received several grants to further develop PLAR in the Child, Family and Community Studies and in education technology.

One especially interesting PLAR project was a community partnership between the college's Habitat Restoration program and an outside agency, The Steelhead Corporation. We have an agreement to assess graduates of their federally funded training program for credits in an advanced citation in Habitat Renewal. Our Coaching program has just completed extensive development work in PLAR and learning outcomes and will begin PLAR in Fall 1999.

We are in the process of developing our next Master Education Plan (educational credit offerings for the next five years). Each Faculty in the Instructional Division has committed to further develop PLAR in at least one program not already involved in their Faculty Plan. Later this Spring we will meet to consider how the PLAR Team will work with the Committee of Deans in the Instructional Division to prioritize and implement each Faculty's plans.

Future Directions

Key future directions for PLAR must be considered in the larger context of related educational change initiatives in Douglas College. As an institution, we are at a cross-roads in embedding educational change into policy and practice. A major initiative over the next few years is the development of an "open learning framework" that encourages greater access and flexibility for the global community to our educational services. This will allow us to integrate our non-credit continuing education offerings (courses, workshops and CE credentials), our assessment services (including the PLAR Service) with our credit courses and programs. In some cases, e will reduce our current program/ discipline acceptance processes/ prerequisites to allow students to have flexible access to all college courses.

A second important initiative is the development of learning outcomes for all curriculum. We will have learning outcomes for our entrance requirements, courses and programs and a graduate profile for all Douglas students (knowledge, skills, and values). Learning outcomes will be used in curriculum design, teaching and learning strategies and activities, and for assessment practices. This will encourage greater transparency of our educational services and greater accountability to the public, sending and receiving institutions, and employers.

A third initiative is the development of education technology to reach new and current students. We have a number of provincial programs (Psychiatric Nursing) that serve the whole province that require access to our credentials without physically attending courses at one of our campuses. We also have many programs/ disciplines that could serve students from a global perspective through the careful use of educational technology. We especially need education technology for distance advising and assessing of PLAR and have received a grant this year to develop those procedures and tools.

Related to the previous initiative is a need to reconceptualize our curriculum so students can have access to our educational services in unique ways. We will move towards derived curriculum so that students can access the courses (or components of a course) in ways that meet their needs and interests.

These initiatives will be the focus of a major planning day in May 1999 to reconceptualize what our college is, who we serve, who we are, and what we will do in the future.

Specific to PLAR, this Study has given Douglas College valuable insights into our PLAR practices and the barriers that exist in further developing and embedding PLAR across our institution. Our Focus Groups of PLAR students and faculty assessors gave us greater insight into our college from a personal perspective. Their recommendations, eg. PLAR mentors, self-evaluation and flexible opportunities for continued studies, will receive special attention in our development work. We now have greater knowledge of our institution, our PLAR students, our PLAR assessors and our directions for change.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

FANSHAWE COLLEGE OF APPLIED ARTS AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Size, Student Enrolment and Fields of Study

In 1998 – 1999 Fanshawe College had 103 full-time programs. 8,554 full-time students were enrolled in post-secondary programs in the Fall of 1998 and 8,065 students were enrolled in the Winter semester of 1999 (these figures are approximate). 40,395 students were enrolled in part-time studies for the period April 1, 1998 to March 31, 1999. The full-time staff compliment is 922.

Fields of Study at Fanshawe College remain as outlined in the Institutional Profile. The Information Technology Division has transferred from the School of Business to the School of Technology. Plans are underway to significantly increase the number of post-diploma programs. By the Fall of 1999 we will have 27 high technology (multimedia) classrooms at the London campus, compared to 15 one year ago.

Financial Status

The total College budget for 1998 – 1999 is approximately 87 million dollars. Tuition for most programs will increase by 10% in the Fall and based on operating costs, Fanshawe College will be applying differential tuition to a few post-diploma programs.

Effective August 31, 1998 a revised prior learning assessment fee structure was implemented at Fanshawe College. Full and part-time students may now apply for an Advanced Standing Assessment based on a combination of formal learning from another recognized post-secondary institution and prior learning from experience (previously only formal education from a recognized post-secondary educational institution was considered for Advanced Standing designation). The fee for this service is $100. In order to apply for Advanced Standing students must first apply to the program of their choice through the Ontario College Application Service (OCAS). The fee for this service is $65. Part-time students who are seeking credit in for more than 25% of program content may apply for Advanced Credit based on prior learning from experience and/or formal academic learning. The fee for this service is $100.

Registered full-time post-secondary students are required to pay $25. for each course challenged by a method other than portfolio. Portfolio assessments for full-time post-secondary students remain at $77. per course challenge. All other students must pay $77. per course challenge regardless of the challenge method.

PLAR Activities

From September 1, 1998 to April 1999 119 portfolio assessments and 93 challenges were conducted. New codes have been implemented within the Student Information System which allow us to capture prior learning assessments in both Advanced Standing and Advanced Credit Applications. We believe this will result in a more accurate count of PLA activity and increased government revenue.

In March 1997 the College decided to decentralize the prior learning assessment service. As a result the PLAR Facilitator's position was eliminated and the PLAR office disbanded. Students are now advised to seek information and application forms for prior learning assessments from the Division in which their program is housed. The Administrative Assistant has assumed the role of PLAR Liaison Officer and is carrying on out most functions of the former PLAR facilitator. On-going (twice monthly) orientation sessions are now being conducted for individuals seeking information about the PLAR service, including the assessment process. In December 1997 the Prior Learning Assessment Working Group of College Council was eliminated. This group was established in 1993 to assist with the implementation and development of the PLAR service. The group met monthly until its demise.

Over the past few years, and currently, Fanshawe College has been proactive in taking PLAR outside of the College and into the Community. PLAR Information and Orientation sessions have been conducted for the general public and for specific target groups. Train the Trainer Portfolio Development Facilitator training was delivered to members of community-based agencies within the four-county area Fanshawe serves. Fanshawe has partnered with several community-based agencies in joint portfolio projects, including a current project involving 11 community-based agencies and Fanshawe College. This project focuses on research that will assist learners who wish to use computer-mediated learning. Currently 41 learners from the 11 community-based agencies are developing their professional portfolios on-line. Fanshawe College also provided leadership to the community in establishing the Prior Learning Assessment Network of London and District. This network is now comprised of a significant number of community-based agencies, the local Public School Board and Fanshawe College. Members have established a certain degree of expertise in PLAR and we continue to improve our knowledge and skills through on-going professional development. Fanshawe College in cooperation with its community partners, continues to refine and deliver portfolio development for identified target groups of special needs learners.

Future Directions

The continued growth of PLAR at Fanshawe College is threatened by the cessation of dedicated provincial funding and by the lack of focused leadership and commitment. However, PLAR will continue to grow and to thrive for the following reasons:

The service is essential for adult learners who have now come to expect it.

A number of programs and program faculty and administration are convinced of the value of PLAR and have incorporated the Portfolio, and other assessment methods into their programs. Examples of these programs are Fitness and Health Promotion, Ambulance and Emergency Care and Personal Support Worker.

The Portfolio Development Course will continue to be available to learners in class, via video-conferencing and on-line.

PLAR is growing in the community and the community looks to the College for leadership in PLAR initiatives.

PLAR policies and procedures are well established and PLAR practitioners at Fanshawe College can rely on Staff Development to assist them with growth and development in PLAR practice and process, and to provide them with opportunities to enhance related skills. Like our partner Colleges in this study, Fanshawe College is committed to provide quality learning opportunities and services to our students. A comprehensive, credible prior learning assessment service is essential to this commitment.

MOHAWK COLLEGE OF APPLIED ARTS & TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Size, Student Enrolment and Fields of Study

The Mission of Mohawk College is to deliver selected educational and training programs, courses and services in an innovative lifelong learning environment designed to contribute to the economic well-being and the quality of life of the communities it serves.

The most significant change at the College since 1993 has been the 35% reduction of staff as a result of the cutbacks in transfer payments to the Colleges. As a result, some sections/programs have been terminated, departments and divisions have been amalgamated, and faculty have been scheduled to teach all three terms which leaves little or no time for curriculum and professional development. PLA is only one of many initiatives (alternative delivery, student retention, technology upgrade) competing for fewer resources.

Enrolment:

Full-time Post-Secondary /Program Enrolment: 15,517 (decrease of 6.4% from 1993)

Part-time Course Enrolment: 43, 531 (decrease of 29% from 1993)

Faculties:

Business, Applied Arts and Access; Health Sciences and Human Services; Engineering Technology (from 6 faculties in 1993 to 3 faculties in 1998)

Tuition Fee:

1998/99 post-secondary tuition fee for two semesters is $1842.42 (an increase of 70% from 1993)

Full time Faculty:

399 (when PLA was implemented in the CAAT system in 1993 there were 613 faculty - a decrease of 35%)

Administration and Support Staff:

345 (this number was 523 in 1993 - a decrease of 34%)

Part-time Faculty:

1239 (there is an increase in the use of part-time faculty to teach in full-time programs).

Approved Budget Plan:

$89,696,135 (In 1993 the budget was $114,914,000 -a decrease of 25%)

Financial Status of PLAR:

The College has demonstrated its commitment to PLAR by continuing to support the PLAR Office at the same level, despite the financial shortage. PLAR assessment fees have been increased to "up to $84.00" with discretion to set a rate below that ceiling.

New PLAR Activities:

The PLAR Coordinator and the Coordinator of Architectural Technology have been actively involved with the development of PLAR for the Canadian Technology Human Resources Board (CTHRB). PLAR is an integral part of the National Standards for Technicians and Technologists. Plans are underway for Mohawk to deliver the Validating Agent and Assessor Training across Canada beginning in the Fall of 1999.

The PLAR Coordinator continues to provide PLA training and development on a contract basis to educational providers across Canada.

An agreement has been signed between management and Local 240 for the replacement of the In-service Teacher Training Program with the Contact South, Teaching the Adult Learner Certificate. The PLAR Coordinator is assisting experienced faculty to obtain credit in this Program through PLAR.

An academic policy to facilitate assessment against Program Outcomes in addition to course outcomes is currently before College Council.

Business Development is negotiating a Program Review on a pilot basis with a major local employer.

The portfolio development course has been recognized as a benefit to learners as a means for showcasing their prior learning and will be offered to full-time students to fulfil the general education requirements of their diploma.

Future Directions:

The College has recently developed a five year academic plan. PLAR has been acknowledged as a core element in the academic planning process. Programs and resources will be identified to assist with the integration of PLAR into the curriculum development planning process. It is recognized by the College that PLAR thrives in Programs that have a designated PLAR champion as well as financial resources to support these initiatives.

In the year 2000 the new Mohawk - McMaster Institute for Applied Health Sciences will be opening. Since PLAR has been active in Health Sciences we anticipate having a PLAR presence at the Institute.

We have identified the need to develop a tracking system for PLAR learners that will facilitate data collection and decision making in the future.

We continue to work towards an outcome-based model of student achievement rather than the traditional course completion model of student performance.

With an increase in distance education programs there has been an increase demand for PLAR at a distance. We are expanding our ability to offer assessments through proctors.

There will be a need to provide ongoing PLAR training for new faculty assessors. PLAR training will be integrated into the 3 phases of the Western Region Teacher Training for new hires. It is planned that ongoing training will be available at Mohawk College through a mentoring system.

Recommendations for Policy Makers:

PLAR should not be a hardship on the learner or the institution. Institutions must receive adequate funding in order to offer quality PLAR services.

In order to facilitate program completion for PLAR applicants, there is a pressing need for course registration. While there has been some movement in this area, the current funding model does not address this need for part-time learners interested in full-time programs.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

RED RIVER COLLEGE OF APPLIED ARTS & TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Size, Student Enrolment and Fields of Study

Red River College (RRC) is a growing and dynamic institution with a mission to provide high quality educational and training opportunities to assist with economic, cultural and social development in Manitoba within the context of the global marketplace.

RRC serves an annual student population of over 32,000 full and part-time students — 7,200 full-time, 25,600 part-time at 7 campuses, including 5 Regional Centres located outside of Winnipeg. Over 90-post secondary joint baccalaureate, advanced diploma, diploma, certificate and preparatory programs in fields of applied arts, applied sciences, business, community services, developmental education, health and technology are offered. In addition, the college provides training for apprenticeship in 20 designated trades as well as a comprehensive array of courses for part-time learners in Winnipeg and across Manitoba through its Continuing Education and Distance Education offices as well as its Regional Centres.

The College has a permanent staff of approximately 750 with another 300-400 individuals employed at various times throughout the year to deliver contract training and provide administrative support services.

Financial Status

RRC operates on a non-profit basis with an annual budget of approximately $64 million. The College relies on provincial government grant support, which constitutes 53% of its total revenue.

RRC continues to receive provincial grant funding for the PLA office — PLA Facilitator and a part-time administrative assistant. The costs of development of PLA processes and systems have been included in some program budgets. For example, in 1998, the Developmental Service Worker Program, received staff resources for the development of PLA practices in the two-year program including PLA advising capacity.

The College's PLA Fee Range Guidelines developed in 1995 were reviewed in 1998 and the revised fees became effective January 1999. These fee ranges provide program areas with the guidelines to determine fees for the services provided in the assessment of prior learning. The rates are $60. Per portfolio assessment, $50. Per written challenge up to a maximum of $200 per course and $30 per hour for demonstrations up to a maximum of $150 per assessment plus the cost of consumables. The PLA fees are designed to be cost recovery.

PLAR Activities

PLAR activity at RRC continues to expand across the College as program areas experience an increased demand from learners, business, industry and the community for PLA services.

Internal

In 1998-99 there has been increased growth in PLA development, implementation and in the number of course/program assessments. For example, in Early Childhood Education (ECE), 53 students were active in completing PLA course assessments and between September 1998 – April 1999, 125 assessments of prior learning were completed.

In 1998, the PLA Policies and Procedures were revised and approved (as per policy review every three years) to ensure currency and relevancy for the evolving growth of PLA.

During the past year, the PLA office was very active in providing developmental services across the college to meet the demand for faculty training/professional development and resource assistance to college programs embarking into PLA. A series of training seminars for faculty and staff were offered and will continue to be provided on a regular basis. The PLA Facilitator also provided additional resource support to program areas (i.e., Developmental Services Worker, Child and Youth Care, Manufacturing, Technician) in the development of PLA processes.

The College also completed evaluations of external courses offered by business and industry for college credit equivalency. For example, in March 1999, the Nursing faculty assessed an Anatomy and Medical Terminology course offered by a Winnipeg health care facility for credit equivalency in the Health Unit Clerk certificate program. This course is now recognized for college credit for employees from the health care facility, who complete this course.

The PLA Facilitator, college administration and faculty continued to partner on a project with Bristol Aerospace, a major aerospace company in Winnipeg. College instructors have developed the assessments and challenge process packages for courses in the Manufacturing Technician Program. Bristol Aerospace employees prove learning for these courses through a variety of flexible assessment methods including employer verification of learning, projects, assignments, tests, skill demonstration, self-assessment, etc.

This past year, additional opportunities were available for learners to access the skills necessary for portfolio development. In addition to a Portfolio Development Course, through Continuing Education and Distance Education, a series of workshops was offered, as well as individual advisement through the PLA office. This insures learners are able to access information on portfolio development in a variety of ways to better meet their needs.

The past year RRC also initiated PLA opportunities for its faculty. RRC faculty, in addition to having a relevant degree(s) and experience must also complete a Certificate in Adult Education (CAE). They are able to prove that they have learning from work and life experience for CAE courses through portfolio development and assessment. The Portfolio Development course is also a credit course in the CAE program.

External

RRC developed a proposal and served as the lead proponent for a project to establish the Manitoba Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) Centre, which opened in January 1998. The Manitoba PLA Centre, now incorporated, as a non-profit entity, governed by a Board of Directors, provides both developmental and advisory services across the province. The College continues to support the Manitoba PLA Centre through participation on the Board of Directors and through partnering in various projects (i.e., PLAR process for Manufacturing Technician Diploma Program and Machinist/Tool and Die Apprenticeship Program).

In 1998-99 RRC continued to promote and support PLAR at the provincial and national level through the PLA Facilitator's leadership role in the Manitoba Prior Learning Assessment Network (MPLAN) and as Chair of the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA).

Future Directions

RRC, as the largest and most comprehensive college in Manitoba, is committed to being a leader in post secondary education for the 21st century. With a new comprehensive five-year Strategic Plan, the College will expand its programs to meet the needs of the labour market and continue to provide high quality graduates. One of the actions of RRC's Strategic Plan includes the development and implementation of a five-year PLA plan. Presently, the college PLA Committee is drafting the plan, which details the key outcomes, actions/strategies, timelines and responsibilities for the integration and implementation of PLA practices across the College. Inherent in the plan is the belief and commitment that PLA is a key element within the academic learning process. The PLA Committee recognizes the need for the continued expansion of PLA strategies in existing and new College programs, as an integral part of academic design and curriculum renewal. Also important for future implementation of PLA is the evaluation of PLA practices to ensure high quality assessment and service delivery, the further development of self-assessment activities as a key component of PLA and the provision of PLA services in partnership with business, industry and the community.

RRC is currently investigating the development of a learning outcome approach to courses and programs that is of vital significance for the expansion of PLA. The learning outcome approach will further enhance RRC's capability to provide accessible PLA services.

The Manitoba PLA Centre's advising service could have a significant impact on the demand for and expansion of PLA in institutions across the province. Currently, the Centre provides PLA advisory services to a wide range of clients including employment insurance recipients, social assistance recipients, workers in transition and other individuals. The Centre's PLA Advisors offer these services in Winnipeg and in Employment Centres in Brandon and the northern regions of Thompson and The Pas. This advising capacity coupled with increased PLA marketing could increase the demand for PLA services in the next few years.

Participation in this Cross Canada Study on PLAR has provided RRC with valuable information and data collection tools to continue developing practices to ensure PLAR becomes a true part of the way we do business. The study results provide substantial information on PLA learners, assessors and RRC implementation practices. It provides us with a solid base for the development of new PLA activity and for refinement of PLA practice in existing College programs.

APPENDIX G — DATA COLLECTION FIELDS IN DATA COLLECTION TOOL

PLAR Learner Information

Student number
Learner Cross-Canada alpha designation
Learner Cross-Canada Index number
Gender
Date of birth
PLAR orientation
Portfolio course completion
Status of portfolio course

PLAR Program Information

Student status
Program enrolment date
Program code
Program name
Program discipline
Program length
Program type
Program status
Number of courses required by program
Number of credits required by program
Graduation status
Graduation grade basket #1
Graduation grade basket #2
Year of graduation
Tuition paid
Tuition type

PLAR Course Information

Alpha
Course record number
Course status
Course name
Course number
Course length
Course level
Course credits
Course completion date
Assessment method(s)
Assessment for a single course?
Assessor paid
Payment method
Payment amount
Assessment fee
Assessment fee amount
College application fee
Course grade basket #1
Course grade basket #2
Related to the following program(s)

Traditional Student Information

Student number
Learner Cross-Canada alpha designation
Learner Cross-Canada Index number
Gender
Date of birth

Traditional Student Program Information

Student status
Program enrolment date
Program code
Program name
Program discipline
Program length
Program type
Program status
Number of courses required by program
Number of credits required by program
Graduation status
Graduation grade basket #1
Graduation grade basket #2
Year of graduation

Traditional Student Course Information

Alpha
Course record number
Course status
Course name
Course number
Course length
Course level
Course credits
Course completion date
College application fee
Course grade basket #1
Course grade basket #2
Related to the following program(s)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

APPENDIX H - TRADITIONAL STUDENT PROGRAMS

College Ahuntsic
Instrumentation et Controle (Electronics)
Techniques Ambulancieres
Techniques de Radiotherapie
Techniques Policieres

Conestoga College
Business Administration/Accounting
Computer Programmer Analyst
Critical Care Nursing
Early Childhood Education
Health Care Aide
Microcomputer Application Certificate
Nursing
Personal support Worker
Recreation and Leisure Services
Teacher/Trainer of Adults

Douglas College
Child and Youth Care Counsel
Community Support Worker
Financial Services
Home Support Worker
Therapeutic Recreation

Fanshawe College
Basic Business
Business – marketing
Child and Youth Worker
Developmental Services Worker
Early Childhood Education
Health Care Aide
Law and Security Administration
Nursing
Office Administration – Executive
Office Administration – General
Social Services Worker

Mohawk College
Business Administration
Business Applications for Windows
Business Computer Applications
Child and Youth Worker
Competence in the French Language
Early Childhood Education
ECE Resource Teacher
Health Care Aide
Home Support Worker
Information Systems Technician
Law Clerk
Nursing
Office Administration – Executive
Office Administration – General
Office Administration – Legal
Office Administration – Medical
Pharmacy Assistant
Social Services

College of the North Altantic
Computer Studies Coop
Early Childhood Distance Education
Electronics Engineering Technology
Office Administration – General First Year
Office Administration (Medical)

Red River College
Business & Admin. Studies
Child and Youth Care Worker
Early Childhood Education
Health Care Aide
Nursing

APPENDIX I — DETAILED REPORT ON DATA COLLECTION ON PLAR LEARNERS AND TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

1. Sources of Information

Data from seven partner institutions on all recorded PLAR learners, their programs and courses

Data from seven partner institutions on sample populations of traditional students

Data from seven partner institutions on gender distribution of general student populations

2. Data Collection Procedures

a. Learner/Student Data (Overview)

Data on PLAR learners and traditional students were compiled in custom-designed Access databases by all partner institutions. Written guidelines on parameters of each data field were provided. Institutional data were combined into a central data repository. Up-to-date copies of the repository were kept on disk at all times. A copy of the central database was also held by the digital data specialist who conducted over 200 queries and reports to identify data entry errors. All errors were reviewed with partner institutions and corrected data were re-submitted to the Study Co-ordinator. Following the establishment of the final central database, all errors and omissions were corrected centrally by the digital data specialist and the Study Co-ordinator with information supplied by the partner institutions. Manual reviews of datasheet views of the data were also conducted by the Study Co-ordinator and corrections made using simple queries and data filters.

Data Items

Gender

The data collection tool permitted data entry through a drop-down box containing three possible items - M, F and N/A (information not available).

Date of Birth

Data on date of birth were entered by d/m/y. Modifications had to be made to some institutions' data that were not submitted in this format. The age of each learner and student was calculated by determining their age once for each year in which they had an assessment or took a course during the study period and then averaging the result by the number of years.

Data on date of birth were available from all institutions but not for all learners and students.

PLAR Orientation

Data on whether PLAR learners had received orientation for PLAR were entered by each institution using the data entry options of Y, N, or N/A (information on orientation not available). Several institutions did not have records of all learners who took PLAR but entered "Y" as it was their policy and general practice to provide orientation to all PLAR learners.

Portfolio Course

Data indicated whether PLAR learners had taken a portfolio development course. Data entry options of Y, N and N/A (information not available) were available. Errors and misinterpretations of field definitions were identified and corrected centrally. Data field did not apply to traditional students.

Portfolio Course Status

Data entry indicated whether the institutions' portfolio development course was a credit or non-credit course using data entry options of C (credit) and N (non-credit). Errors were identified and corrected centrally.

Data Validation and Verification

Queries and error reports were prepared to identify data errors. All errors were corrected by the institutional partners, the digital data specialist or the Study Co-ordinator.

Challenges and Limitations

The data collection tool initially had several required fields to protect against data entry error. However, due to electronic downloading by a number of the partners combined with tight timelines for data collection, many of these protections had to be removed to facilitate data entry. The results were a higher level of initial data errors than originally anticipated and delays in the commencement of data analysis. A background paper prepared by the digital data specialist on the development of the data collection tool is available from the Study Co-ordinator.

b. Program Data (Overview)

The digital data specialist and the Study Co-ordinator reviewed program data for data entry errors using queries and error reports. Inconsistencies in institutions' interpretation of data field definitions were identified and corrected with the assistance of the partners.

Data Items

Program Code

A program code was assigned to each program at each institution. It allowed program data to be linked to the appropriate courses where learners and students had multiple program enrolments during the study period. These codes were selected and entered by data entry staff at the partner institutions. Program codes were entered centrally for four institutions using unique identifiers. Program codes were reviewed using queries, error reports and visual reviews to identify inconsistencies in code data. Corrections were made centrally.

Student Status

Student status data was entered into the data collection tool using the options of PT (part-time) and FT (full-time) for every student. Queries and error reports were run to confirm appropriate and complete data entry.

Program Enrolment Date

Program enrolment date data were entered using the academic year in which the program was commenced (e.g. 1993/94). Errors in data entry were detected and corrected centrally using queries and error reports. Program enrollment dates do not necessarily indicate the start of a student's study period. For example, Douglas College does not have "programs". Also Fanshawe College part-time students often enroll in programs near the end of their studies.

Courses taken through Continuing Education, Part-time Studies or Cheminement pars Cours at Ahuntsic are listed in the database as if these categories were programs.

Program Name

Data on program names were entered by the institutions and reviewed centrally through queries, error reports and visual reviews to correct inconsistencies, spelling and spacing errors and identify missing data. A few programs have the designation N/A instead of a name where the assessment was done for a reason other than to obtain a college credential.

Program Discipline

Nine discipline categories were used to group programs. Data were reviewed centrally through queries, error reports and visual reviews to correct inconsistencies, spelling and spacing errors and identify missing data.

Program Length

Six program length categories were initially established. These were revised and reduced to five categories during the early stages of data analysis and the data was revised using mass queries. Wherever possible, part-time programs were assigned program lengths equal to what the lengths would be if the programs were delivered on a full-time basis. Program length categories were: <1 Academic Year, 1 Academic Year, 1 1/2 Academic Years, 2 Academic Years, and 3 Academic Years.

Program Type

Six types of credentials were listed at data entry options for data entry. This information was not extensively used in the analysis. The categories were: attestation, certificate, citation, diploma and post-diploma certificate.

Program Status

Data on program status were entered using the options of FT (full-time), PT (part-time) or B (both) to indicate the availability of the program to adult learners and students. Errors sometimes occurred when data entry clerks confused student status with program status. These errors were identified through queries and corrected centrally.

Number of Courses/Credits Required

Data indicates the number of courses required by the institution to complete a program. At Douglas College credits are used to measure program requirements, generally but not always at the rate of 3 credits per course. These fields were not completed for all courses by some institutions resulting in data gaps. However these fields were not used in this report.

Graduation Status

Data indicates whether the learner or student had graduated from their program(s) through data entry options of Y, N and N/A (not applicable). Data fields left blank were interpreted as a No.

Year of Graduation

Data were entered by academic year and reviewed centrally through queries, error reports and visual reviews to correct inconsistencies, spelling and spacing errors and identify missing data.

Graduation Grade Basket #1

Numeric grades were devised to accommodate institutional differences in grading. They were assigned to learners and students who graduated during the study period using data entry options of 1 – 4. The digital data specialist and the Study Co-ordinator reviewed both grade baskets to eliminate duplication and data entry errors. Error reports and visual reviews of the data were conducted.

Graduation Grade Basket #2

Letter grades were assigned to graduates where these were used by institutions. Only P (pass) and M (mastery) were options. Only one of the grade baskets were completed. The digital data specialist and the Study Co-ordinator reviewed both grade baskets to eliminate duplication and data entry errors. Error reports and visual reviews of the data were conducted.

Tuition Paid

Data indicated whether PLAR learners paid tuition in addition to assessment fees for their PLAR courses. Data entry options were Y, N or N/A (information not available).

Tuition Type

C (course) and P (program) were the data entry options for this field. This data was not used in the Study analysis. However, the institutions reported no difficulties in data entry and simple queries and filters reveal no errors.

Calculated GPA

This field was not used by all institutions. Consequently it was not used in the data analysis. The digital data specialist designed a query to calculate consistent GPAs without using this field by averaging the passing course grades of all learner and student graduates during the five years.

Data Validation and Verification

Queries and error reports were prepared to identify data errors, which were corrected by the institutional partners, the digital data specialist or the Study Co-ordinator.

Challenges and Limitations

Program codes were added late in the data collection process in order to accommodate unanticipated occurrences of multiple program enrolments that occurred at three of the partner institutions. This resulted in additional work for these institutions.

Data analysis revealed that program enrolment dates were unreliable for analysis of some program data relating to learners and students enrolled in more than one program either concurrently or sequentially during the study period. Data were not available for many learners and students at some institutions because student program enrolment did not occur until partway through many learners' programs. In addition learners may have enrolled with several transfer credits or dropped in or out of studies. Most of these difficulties were addressed by restricting analysis of items involving program enrolment to full-time learners who were enrolled in only one program during the study period. Any factors still affecting the data would apply equally to the traditional students.

Not all partner institutions were able to accomplish a conversion of the length of part-time programs to full-time equivalence. To accommodate this difficulty data analysis relying on program length has been restricted to full-time programs.

The quality of data on tuition paid in addition to assessment fees is unreliable for some partner institutions that did not have tracking systems to identify this activity. Some institutions did not follow the data field entry options.

c. Course Data (Overview)

Data Items

Course Name, Number, Length, Level and Credits

Data were reviewed by the Study Co-ordinator and the digital data specialist for inconsistencies and spelling errors. Data was reviewed with the institutional partners and corrected centrally.

Course Completion Date

The course completion date was the academic year in which the course was transcripted or recorded in the student record.

Was assessment for a Single Course

Data indicate whether the assessment was conducted for a single course or a group of courses. The default was a checked box in the field for all single course assessments and for the first course in a multi-course assessment. The box was then unchecked for every course after the first course of a multi-course assessment. There were very few multi-course assessments.

PLAR Method

Several assessment methods were available. Fields were challenge, demonstration, portfolio assessment, standardized test, workplace training evaluation and assessment of military training. More than one method could be checked for each assessment. Limitations on the precision of this data are based on the lack of information on precise methods used at one institution (Fanshawe College).

Assessor Paid

Data indicates whether assessors were paid. Fields were Y or N.

Payment Method

Fields were Transaction Fee, Part of Normal Workload, Overtime, other, Not Available, Not applicable. Data was not always available on payment method where payment was made over and above normal workload. These fields were left blank.

Payment Amount

Data entry was based on institutional records or knowledge of institutional practice. Fields required entry in dollars. In some cases the amount was attributed by averaging known payments in the same program. In other cases, the amount was established by determining an hourly rate for assessor salaries and multiplying it by the number of hours in an assessment.

The table on assessor remuneration reports only payments made over and above normal workload remuneration

Assessment Fee and Assessment Fee Amount

Data indicated whether a fee was charged to PLAR learners. Fields were Y or N. Fee amounts were entered in dollars.

College Application Fee

Data entered related to administrative fees charged to learners and traditional students. The items included in the fees varied by institution and are available from the institutional partners.

Course Grade Basket #1

Numeric grades were devised to accommodate institutional differences in grading. They were assigned to all recorded courses by learners and students during the study period using data entry options of 1 – 4. The digital data specialist and the Study Co-ordinator reviewed both grade baskets to eliminate duplication and data entry errors. Error reports and visual reviews of the data were conducted.

Course Grade Basket #2

Letter grades were assigned to learners and students where these were used by institutions. Grades included: P (pass), M (mastery), UF (unsuccessful PLA/failed TRAD course), W/I (withdrawn/incomplete), and E (exemption/transfer of credit). Only one of the grade baskets were completed. The digital data specialist and the Study Co-ordinator reviewed both grade baskets to eliminate duplication and data entry errors. Error reports and visual reviews of the data were conducted.

APPENDIX J — DETAILED REPORT ON DATA COLLECTION FOR FINANCIAL ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION

This report provides detailed information on the information and procedures used to calculate the costs of PLAR in 1996/97. Each institution selected its programs based on PLAR activity levels and project workload capacity. PLAR costs were compared with the costs of traditional course delivery in the same programs. Additional information is available in background papers prepared by the partners.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- Audited financial and enrolment reports
- Class lists
- Collective agreements
- College calendars
- Costing fee schedules
- College fact books
- College revenue reports
- Cross-Canada Study database
- Electronic student information systems
- Hard-copy accounting files
- Institutional by-laws
- Key performance indicator reports
- Ministry calculation tables on post-secondary activity base
- Ministry funding guidelines
- Operating budget and expenditure reports
- PLAR activity logs
- PLAR policies and procedures
- Salary administration records
- Managers of Information Services
- Managers of Administrative Services
- Institutional heads of finance
- Planning and development departments
- Registrars

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

DESIGN OF FINANCIAL DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES AND TOOL

Three approaches to analyzing the costs of PLAR were initially considered: cost-effectiveness analysis, cost-benefit analysis and cost-utility analysis. Based on advice from educational resources and advice from experts in cost analysis in government and academia, the partners initially selected the cost-effectiveness model which involved detailed accounting of all cost items including personnel, facilities, equipment, materials, supplies, training, client and other inputs. Preliminary discussions were held with Finance personnel at several of the partner institutions and college costing policies and practices were reviewed.

Through these meetings it became clear that a cost-effectiveness approach to the project would not be viable. The colleges did not collect data required to conduct the analysis and the conceptual approach ran counter to that used by the institutions. Additional research was conducted and a second model for cost analysis was developed. This second model was not based on any of the initial three approaches but took into account the current policies and practices of the partner institutions and had the same conceptual framework so that the chances of institutions' confidence in the results of the analysis would be enhanced.

Direct Cost Calculations

This cost analysis model used existing institutional financial data on division and program costs and revenues. Definitions of cost components were established.

Based on initial analysis of the availability of institutions' costing data and in consideration of maintaining manageable workloads, the partners decided that the direct costs of PLAR in programs that had at least two assessments would be considered priority. The costs of PLAR in the remaining programs (those with just one assessment) would be calculated where possible but otherwise would be attributed by averaging calculations conducted for programs with at least two assessments. In addition, it was determined that at some of the partner institutions, only the direct costs of PLAR in full-time programs could be calculated with any accuracy because the institutions did not keep records of direct or indirect program costs for part-time programs.

Indirect Cost Calculations

A formula to calculate indirect costs of PLAR was particularly difficult to develop; a draft formula was devised and advice was obtained from finance experts on the advisory committee as well as from a well-respected academic expert external to the Study.

A cost data collection tool was developed using Microsoft Excel. Chart and narrative guidelines were developed to assist the institutional partners to complete the cost analysis. The Co-ordinator reviewed the cost data collection tool with several partners on a one-to-one basis. The tool was then piloted by the institutional partners using two 1996/97 programs.

The pilot testing revealed four significant flaws in the costing data collection and analysis procedures:

- Indirect costs of PLAR were being treated as if they were the same as overhead contribution.
- The costs of PLAR Facilitators and their office support were being calculated as direct costs of PLAR assessments when most Facilitators were not directly involved in the delivery of assessments.
- In comparing costs of PLAR and traditional course delivery, the costs of PLAR Facilitators and administrative support involved in delivering assessments, were being calculated over the total number of assessments conducted in 1996/97 rather than being pro-rated over the total number of assessments in only those programs selected for the cost analysis.
- The set-up of the cost analysis tool did not accommodate data that several colleges needed to enter on specific government revenues.

The Co-ordinator and the Digital Data Specialist revised the data collection tool to correct these flaws. It was determined that it was not possible to calculate the indirect costs of PLAR assessments in numeric terms. Overhead contributions were calculated instead. Numeric calculation of costs of assessment delivery was restricted to direct costs.

A review of indirect cost items for traditional program delivery at each institution indicated that the indirect costs of PLAR assessment delivery would be significantly lower than the indirect costs of traditional course delivery. As a result it would be inappropriate to attribute the same indirect costs percentages (of direct costs or revenues) for PLAR as are normally attributed to traditional course activities. Indirect costs of PLAR assessment delivery were prepared in narrative terms using a chart that characterized the extent to which PLAR learners utilize typical institutional indirect cost items relative to their use by traditional students.

The costs of Facilitators and their supports were removed as direct costs of assessment delivery at the relevant institutions but were included in the indirect cost component as described above. The costing tool was revised to accommodate the institutions' data entry needs.

Total costs of all PLAR services were divided into two categories: non-assessment PLAR activity costs and assessment delivery costs. Each institution determined the activities at their institutions that fell into each category. The data collection tool was modified to perform calculations of both cost categories. Each institution prepared the financial data for each category with input from institutional finance staff. Each college confirmed the accuracy of their data.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

Partners obtained costing figures from a variety of institutional sources (see Sources of Information). Common definitions of cost items proved to be difficult to establish throughout the process but were eventually resolved. Data was entered into the data collection tool either manually or through the preparation of Excel worksheets that were downloaded into the tool.

PROGRAM SELECTION

a. Total Direct Costs of PLAR Assessments

With two exceptions, the total direct costs of assessments in all programs at each institution in 1996/97 were calculated. In some cases, where programs had only a few assessments, costs were not directly calculated but attributed by averaging assessment costs of all other programs. At Red River College, it was determined that only the costs of PLAR in full-time programs could be calculated with any accuracy because PLAR in part-time programs operated on a cost recovery basis. At College Ahuntsic, only the costs of three programs could be calculated.

Programs with only a small number of assessments were grouped and costs were calculated based on averages of the costs of those programs that were individually calculated.

b. Average Cost of PLAR Assessments per Course

The purpose of determining the average direct cost per assessment was to facilitate a comparison with the cost of courses in the same programs delivered through traditional means. Therefore this calculation includes a selection of programs in which both PLAR and traditional course costs were compiled. It does not include all programs and courses in which PLAR was conducted. Per course costs for assessment were calculated by dividing total direct costs of assessment delivery in each program by the number of assessments. The programs selected for this comparison are listed in the chart in Appendix K.

PLAR ACTIVITY

1. Non-assessment PLAR Activity Costs

a. PLAR Facilitator

Costing for the PLAR Facilitator included salaries and benefits which were pro-rated according to the percentage of their PLAR time spent on non-assessment activities.

College Ahuntsic - 100% (5 counsellors @ 20% each)	$57,000
College of the North Atlantic 100%	$15,000
Conestoga College 75%	$61,742
Douglas College 100%	$34,000
Fanshawe College, 75%	$54,960
Mohawk College 50%	$30,566
Red River College 100%	$50,698

b. PLAR Administrative Support

Administrative support included salaries and benefits pro-rated according to the time their PLAR work assignment was spent on non-assessment activities.

College Ahuntsic - 100%	$5,600
College of the North Atlantic - 0%	$0
Conestoga College - 100%	$4,338
Douglas College - 100%	$3,800
Fanshawe College - 30%	$4,460
Mohawk College - 50%	$10,232
Red River College - 100%	$9,835

c. PLAR Non-salary Expenses

Non-salary expenses included materials and supplies, postage and photocopying at all institutions. Some partners also included professional development, travel and telephone expenses.

College Ahuntsic -	$0
College of the North Atlantic -	$0
Conestoga College -	$2,380
Douglas College -	$500
Fanshawe College -	$4,401
Mohawk College -	$3,696
Red River College -	$2,345

d. Overhead Contribution

Overhead contributions of non-assessment PLAR activities were calculated by deducting direct costs of non-assessment activities from revenues targeted for those activities.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

2. ASSESSMENT DELIVERY COSTS

Institutions varied in their determination of the direct cost of delivering assessments.

Assessors

Four partner institutions included only the costs of assessors in the direct costs of delivering assessments. The amount paid to assessors over and above their regular salaries and benefits by way of cash, time off in lieu of overtime or over-time were calculated manually or taken from the Study database. In some cases, the salaries of assessors were pro-rated by determining their salaries and benefits on an hourly basis and multiplying the result by the time spent on delivering assessments. In other cases, the hourly rate of the assessor was known. The figures below represent the total costs of delivering assessments in 1996/97 for the following four institutions.

College Ahuntsic -	$29,820 (for three programs)
College of the North Atlantic -	$1,800
Douglas College -	$7,950
Red River College -	$16,456 (for four full-time programs)

Assessors plus Facilitator, Administrative Support and Non-salary Expenses

Assessors

Three partner institutions included the following costs of assessors in the direct costs of delivering assessments.

Conestoga College -	$5,956
Fanshawe College -	$10,701
Mohawk College -	$19,141

PLAR Facilitators

Three institutions attributed a portion of their Facilitator's time directly to the delivery of assessments.

Conestoga College - 25%	$20,581
Fanshawe College - 25%	$18,320
Mohawk College - 50%	$30,566

PLAR Administrative Support

Two institutions attributed a portion of their PLAR Office administrative support to the direct costs of assessment delivery.

Fanshawe College - 70%	$10,404
Mohawk College - 50%	$10,232

Non-salary Expenses of Facilitator's Office

Two institutions attributed a portion of their PLAR Office non-salary expenses to the direct costs of assessment delivery.

Fanshawe College - 25%	$1,543
Mohawk College - 50%	$3,696

d. Overhead Contribution

Overhead contributions of assessment delivery were calculated by deducting direct costs of assessment delivery from revenues targeted for those activities. They were then expressed as a percantage of revenues by dividing total overhead contributions by total revenues.

3. INDIRECT COSTS OF PLAR

Indirect costs of PLAR non-assessment activities and assessment delivery were not numerically calculated as the data necessary to determine costs were not available. The indirect costs of assessment delivery only, are represented in Table 15.

4. TOTAL NUMBER OF PLAR ASSESSMENTS

The total number of assessments per program in 1996/97 was taken from the database for all but two institutions. At Conestoga College and Fanshawe College the databases contained assessment data based on academic year but the costing tool contained cost data based on fiscal year. The number of assessments for the year 1996/97 was adjusted to more accurately represent the number of assessments conducted in the fiscal year. This was accomplished by combining 5/12 of the assessments conducted in the 1995/96 academic year and 7/12 of the assessments conducted in the 1996/97 academic year.

5. AVERAGE DIRECT COST PER COURSE USING PLAR

The purpose of determining the average direct cost per course using PLAR was to facilitate a comparison with the cost of courses in the same programs delivered through traditional means. Therefore this calculation includes only the programs in which both PLAR and traditional course costs were determined. Per course costs for assessment were calculated by dividing total direct costs of assessment delivery in each program by the number of assessments.

A per course contribution to overhead (or revenues net of direct costs) for an average assessment was calculated by deducting an average assessment's direct costs from an average assessment's revenues. Average revenues and costs were obtained by averaging the total revenues and direct costs of assessments in the selected programs and then dividing the result by the number of assessments.

At Douglas College assessment costs could not be determined precisely on a program by program basis. Per assessment costs presented are calculated averages of total costs.

An assumption was made that revenues would be directed to direct costs of assessment delivery.

6. PLAR REVENUE ITEMS

a. Revenues from Government for Non-assessment PLAR Activities

Only two institutions received targeted government funding for this purpose.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

b. Revenues from Government for Assessment Delivery

College Ahuntsic received funding from the Quebec Ministry of Education for each assessment conducted at an average rate of 30% of the funding granted for delivery of a regular course. The funding ratio was therefore approximately 3:1. Additional funding was granted for all assessment activity that resulted in "top-up" learning activities where PLAR candidates were deemed to require further study before credit could be granted. This additional funding was 40%, totaling 70% of the funding granted to deliver a regular course.

Conestoga College, Fanshawe College and Mohawk College received funding from the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training for assessment delivery through a provincial operating grant, the amount of which is set annually. Each institution's share of the grant was based on their level of "activity". "Activity" is based on enrolment and is expressed in terms of funding units. The higher the activity level of an institution, the more funding units they acquire and the greater their share of the operating grant. The value of funding units change from year to year depending on the size of the operating grant determined by the Province. Program funding units may also be weighted depending on the nature of the program, the size and geographic location of the institution. Funding units related to PLAR were deemed to be unweighted by the Ministry in 1993/94. One hundred PLAR assessments were deemed to equal one unweighted funding unit. The value of an unweighted funding unit generated by activity in 1996/97 was $3,153. Therefore, the government revenues generated for an institution by a single prior learning assessment was $31.53. This compares with $221 for a typical 45 hour course in a Business program (which was the benchmark at the time that PLAR's value in funding units was determined in 1993/94). On this basis, PLAR funding was approximately 14% of funding granted for a regular course. To establish government revenues for PLAR assessments, the number of assessments conducted in 1996/97 were multiplied by $31.53.

College of the North Atlantic, Douglas College and Red River College received no government funding for assessment delivery.

c. Advising Fees

Douglas College charged advising fees to some PLAR learners for counseling services.

d. Assessment Fees

All institutions charged assessment fees to all PLAR learners.

e. Administrative Fees

Red River College required learners to pay admission fees to enroll in full-time programs prior to taking prior learning assessment. Admission fees were not charged for assessments in part-time programs. College Ahuntsic charged PLAR learners a one-time fee of $30.

Military personnel who undertook PLAR through the Collegial Studies Program for the Canadian Armed Forces (CSPCAF) at College Ahuntsic were charged a one-time administrative fee ($50).

f. Contributions per Course

Assessment revenues per course from government, assessment fees and administrative fees minus direct costs of assessment delivery resulted in overhead contribution (or revenues net of direct costs). This calculation did not take into account indirect costs of assessment delivery.

TRADITIONAL COURSE ACTIVITY

Traditional program revenues from government, tuition and other administrative fees were calculated for 1996/97.

Direct Program Costs

Traditional direct program costs were determined using the direct cost items normally used by each institution including the costs of co-ordinators, instruction, instructional materials and supplies. Costs for part-time programs were calculated separately where necessary.

Total Number of Course Registrations

Course registration data was obtained from institutional audited enrolment reports.

Average Direct Cost per Course

Average direct costs per course were calculated by dividing total direct costs by the number of course registrations.

Average overhead contributions (or revenues net of direct costs) were calculated by deducting program direct costs from program revenues and dividing the result by the number of course registrations. An assumption was made that revenues would be directed to direct program costs.

Indirect Costs of Traditional Courses

Not calculated

5. TRADITIONAL COURSE REVENUES

Government Revenues

Government revenues varied by institution. College Ahuntsic received funding based on a government-set rate per teaching hour multiplied by the number of course hours in the program. The result was then further multiplied by 15, representing the number of students. Funding was 30 - 70% higher than funding granted for PLAR assessments. Revenues for full-time and part-time programing were calculated separately.

Conestoga College, Fanshawe College and Mohawk College received funding based on a complicated funding formula that distributes the general purpose operating grant to colleges based on college activity levels. Activity levels are based on enrolments and in the same manner as funding for PLAR - the higher the activity, the greater a college's portion of the operating grant. The value of a program funding unit in 1996/97 varied according to assigned weight. Government revenues were calculated taking program weights into account.

College of the North Atlantic received funding on a block grant basis and was able to identify each program's revenues. Red River received provincial funding in a block grant for all funded activities, programs and services. It was not possible to break the funding done to a course level for a traditional full-time program.

Tuition

Tuition payments were recorded from institutional audited financial records.

Administrative Fees

Conestoga College and Red River College charged administrative fees to traditional students. This column in the data collection tool was also used by Fanshawe College to record revenues from other sources including co-op fees, revenues from the sale of course materials, contract training services and adult training. Mohawk College charged administrative fees but did not include them in their cost calculations as they felt the fees were not related to program delivery.

Student Profile Revenues

Douglas College received student profile revenues from the provincial government. Data was collected from audited financial reports. These revenues were used for the delivery of instruction and instructional materials and supplies for program delivery.

DATA VALIDATION AND VERIFICATION

At each institution, costing procedures were conducted in consultation with senior financial staff. The financial data was validated and verified by each institution.

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

The financial analysis went through several iterations before the design and results were acceptable to all partner institutions. In three particular areas unanimous agreement on how the data should be presented could not be reached and data was consequently presented in more than one format to accommodate different perspectives. The most significant of these was the issue of whether the PLAR Facilitator performed duties that constituted direct costs of assessment delivery. Another difference of opinion concerned the presentation of overhead contributions as percentages of costs or of revenues. A third area of disagreement was whether costs should be presented as net costs after revenues were deducted as well as costs before revenues were deducted. In all three instances, a single resolution was not possible and the report reflects a compromise by presenting all perspectives. This approach runs the risk of the report losing clarity but has the advantage of representation of all partner institutions.

The partner institutions did not have the capacity to conduct a financial analysis for every program offered in 1996/97. The number of programs involved in the analysis was determined by each institution depending on available resources.

In some instances, exact costs could not be identified and attributions were required. For example, where the exact amount of time an assessor spent on an assessment was not available, an average was taken of those assessments that could be calculated.

At one institution (Red River College), the costs of part-time courses could not be determined. The financial analysis for Red River is limited to selected full-time programs).

In all cases, costs were established using calculations that best reflected the reality of each institution's practices. Although the financial analysis cannot be used to compare costs across institutions, it can be effectively used to compare costs within institutions which has been from the outset, the purpose of this aspect of the Study.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

APPENDIX K — AVERAGE PER COURSE COSTS 1996/97

Institution	Program Name	Average Direct Cost per Assessment	Average Direct Cost per Traditional Course
College Ahuntsic	Instrumentation et controle*	60	366.75
	Techniques ambulancieres*	60	337.05
	Techniques radiotherapie*	60	364.50
Conestoga College	Computer Programmer Analyst, FT	245	346.73
	Business Administration /Accounting, FT	245	214.92
	Recreation and Leisure Services, Ft and PT	248.12	118.01
	Microcomputer Application Certificate, PT	261.67	63.72
	Teacher/Trainer of Adults PT	245	70.30
	Critical Care Nursing	245	139.81
	Early Childhood Education FT and PT	295	237.99
	Health Care Aide PT	270	585.38*
Douglas College	Accounting Management	53	238.91
	Arts	53	266.84
	Child and Youth Care Counselor	53	450.13
	Commerce & Business Administration	53	238.90
	Community Support Worker	53	420.78
	Criminology	53	250.11
	Financial Services	53	241.79
	General Business	53	238.89
	Health Information Systems	53	1038.33
	Home Support Worker	53	628
	Hotel & Restaurant Management	53	238.86
	Marketing Management	53	240.44
	Psychiatric Nursing	53	1,044.41
	Sciences	53	511.43
	Therapeutic Recreation	53	511.43

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Institution	Program Name	Average Direct Cost per Assessment	Average Direct Cost per Traditional Course
Fanshawe College	Business - Marketing	317.43	236.73
	Business - Accounting	302.47	303.77
	Basic Business	292.03	221.60
	Culinary Management	264.93	102.06
	Corporate Communications and Public Relations	287.27	126.49
	Child and Youth Worker	311.47	299.38
	Design - Landscape	297.69	219.15
	Developmental Services Worker	306.15	282.88
	Early Childhood Education	296.94	220.28
	Mechanical Eng. Technology (Mobile Equipment)	302.47	313.88
	Fashion Merchandising	302.47	191.15
	Electrical Engineering Technology	302.47	1,162.15
	Nursing	297.09	643.76
	Fitness and Health Promotion	311.79	229.88
	Law and Security Administration	297.68	180.08
	Social Service Worker	314.21	178.43
	Business (J.N. Alan)	302.47	396.28
	Paramedic	312.63	240.09
	Office Administration (General)	302.47	216.77
	Library and Information Technician	305.51	303.77
	Design - Industrial	302.47	251.14
	Infant and Toddler Care	359.27	122.38
	Educational Assistant	359.27	87.43
	Gas Technician III	289.27	52.43
	Computer Systems Support	289.27	30.78

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Institution	Program Name	Average Direct Cost per Assessment	Average Direct Cost per Traditional Course
Mohawk College	Business Applications for Windows	115.40	38.36
	Early Childhood Education (CE)	167.49	58.76
	Social Services (CE)	154.59	94.70
	Law Clerk	139.92	185.23
	Office Administration - Executive	144.78	216.17
	Office Administration - Legal	142.86	299.93
	Office Administration - Medical	130.67	278.43
	Office Administration - General	142.62	329.26
	Information Systems Technician	150.88	266.30
	Child and Youth Worker (CE)	222.59	132.22
	Business Administration	144.11	199.31
	Pharmacy Assistant (CE)	154.05	94.99
	Nursing	126.97	612.14
	ECE Resource Teacher	167.49	96.27
	Competence in the French Language	135.77	88.04
	Home Support Worker	164.63	67.03
College of the North Atlantic	Applied Business Information Technology	50	254.09
	Computer Studies Co-op	50	78.13
	Computer Support Specialist	50	108.31
	Early Childhood Distance Education	50	40.63
	Business Management General First Year	50	260.19
Red River	Early Childhood Education	77.82	132.36
	Nursing	81.08	436.50
	Dental Assisting	81.08	158.02
	Electronic Engineering Technology	27.05	163.91

Note: College Ahuntsic's traditional course costs were based on a 45-hour course in each program.

* At Conestoga College 1996/97 was an anomaly for the Health Care Aide program. There was a conscious decision made to reduce student activity. Faculty were retained at full cost to redesign the new Personal Support Worker program which replaced the Health Care Aide program.

APPENDIX L — FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

PROTOCOL FOR PLAR LEARNER FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS

Purpose of the Protocol:

For use by the Moderators of Cross-Canada Study learner focus group sessions to ensure meaningful discussion and effective recording, data analysis and reporting.

Purpose of the Focus Groups:

We are holding focus groups to obtain information about PLAR that we can compare/integrate with/supplement the statistical data in the Cross-Canada Study on PLAR. In particular, we want to learn more about how PLAR learners think PLAR can be improved. To do this, we need to learn about the learners' circumstances - why they did PLAR, what they think about their PLAR and the experiences they had - what works well and what does not, what effect PLAR has had on them, what would have improve the PLAR experience.

Goal of the Moderator:

The moderator's goal is to facilitate discussion among focus group participants and record, analyze and report the outcome of participant responses to five pre-set questions. An assistant should accompany the Moderator to take extensive notes throughout the session, unless the session is tape-recorded. If the session is to be recorded, participants should be made aware of this well in advance of the session.

Expected Outcomes:

At the end of the session, the moderator should be able to prepare a written analysis of the session, addressing the following issues:

Why participants participated in PLAR

What they think about their PLAR experiences – what works well and what does not?

What effects did PLAR have on them in relation to life, education, work?

What do the learners think should be done to improve the PLAR process?

Questions for participants:

The following five questions will be posed to the participants. The probing questions below each main question, are designed to assist the moderator in generating discussion. They should not be used at the outset of discussion but rather used, only if necessary to supplement and encourage participants to express themselves.

1. What went into your decision to undertake PLAR?

   Probes:
   what circumstances led you to it - work, personal, professional, educational?
   what factors did you consider?
   did you think you could get easy credits?

2. On the basis of your experience, how well does PLAR work?

   Probes:

   were you able to demonstrate your relevant learning, using the methods the college presented?

   what were the problems you encountered, if any?

   what elements worked well, if any?

   would other methods have worked better; if so what?

   how did you feel about matching your learning to specific courses?

3. Did you benefit from PLAR? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?

   Probes:

   how did it impact on your progress through your program?

   did it cost or save you money?

   did it affect your ability to obtain employment?

   did it affect your self-confidence or self esteem?

4. What needs to be changed or added to improve PLAR services at this college/cegep?

   Probes:

   what would you like to see added to PLAR services?

   what would you like to see deleted from PLAR services?

5. If you were asked to meet with PLAR learners coming in for the first time, what advice would you give them?

   Probes:

   should they do it?

   what should they do first? Next?

   who should they meet with?

Session Agenda:

The Moderators should ensure the following activities take place.

Introduction of Moderator and assistant.

Explanation of the purpose of focus groups in general, and specifically this session

Assurances that confidentiality will be respected, but otherwise acknowledgements will be published in the report.

Participant introductions. Given that the session is only 1 1/2 hours long, a time limit should be set for this activity.

Establishment of ground rules: everyone listens respectfully to all viewpoints, no participant dominates the conversation, differing viewpoints are quite welcome but rebuttals are not.

The Moderator and assistant will watch for and ensure recording of non-verbal cues and communication.

In concluding the session, the Moderator will present some summary comments and ask for feed back on them. Participants should be thanked once again for their assistance with the Study.

Analyzing and Reporting

Immediately after the session, the Moderator and assistant will meet to discuss immediate reactions/first impressions regarding themes, discussion threads, ambiguities, attitudes, key words etc.

The Moderator is responsible for analyzing the range of responses, the common points of view, new ideas, unspoken messages, and comments expressing the big picture rather than the details of a single experience. The Moderator should make particular note of deeper analytical comments presented by participants.

One simple but effective method of organizing notes for analysis, is to colour code comments relating to the various questions and then "cutting and pasting" them together for analysis.

The Moderator's report should specifically address the four issues presented in the Outcomes section of this document as well as any additional topics that arise during the discussions. Also, the demographics of the participants will be recorded anonymously so it is important to record their student numbers in the report.

PROTOCOL FOR PLAR ASSESSOR FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS

Purpose of the Protocol:

For use by the Moderators of Cross-Canada Study assessor focus group sessions to ensure meaningful discussion and effective transcription, data analysis and reporting.

Goal of the Moderator:

To facilitate discussion among focus group participants and document, transcribe, analyze and report the outcome of participant responses to five pre-set questions. An assistant should accompany the Moderator to take extensive notes throughout the session, unless the session is tape-recorded. If the session is to be recorded, participants should be made aware of this well in advance of the session.

Expected Outcomes:

At the end of the session, the moderator should be able to prepare a written analysis of the session, addressing the following issues:

What do the assessors think about the concept of PLAR?

How do the assessors feel about the PLAR process in which they were involved?

What do the assessors think should be done to improve the PLAR process?

What effects has PLAR had on the assessors in relation to their instruction and evaluation activities, their relationships adult students, their views on learning?

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Questions for participants:

The following five questions will be posed to the participants.

NB. The probing questions below each main question, are designed to assist the moderator in generating discussion. They should not be used at the outset of discussion but rather used to encourage participants to express themselves.

1. What do you think of PLAR?

   Probes:

   what impact does it have on faculty from your perspective is it learner-centred
   time-consuming
   requires training
   another responsibility without remuneration
   new learning experience
   a professional development opportunity

2. Focussing on your entire experience as an assessor, from the initial training session to student assessment, how could PLAR be improved?

   Probes:

   what kind of staff training is needed
   were you given adequate support, materials, forms etc. to conduct your assessments
   did the PLAR methods used enable you to effectively assess the student's prior learning
   how do you feel about the process of matching learning to specific courses
   what other methods or activities would be useful

3. What are PLAR's advantages and disadvantages to learners from your perspective?

   Probes:

   do you think it could:
   shorten program duration
   reduce course workload
   save them money
   help them retain or obtain employment
   influence their decision to take training
   improve their chances of completing their training
   improve their self-confidence or self-esteem
   reduce learner interaction and the learning that comes with it
   result in gaps in learners' training
   set them up for failure at the next level
   send employers the wrong message

4. If you were giving a PLAR orientation session to other assessors what advice would you give?

   Probes:

   how much time should they set aside for their first assessment

   what should they do first

   where could they go to obtain support and advice

   should they work alone or in teams

   what would you tell them about PLAR learners

   how should they respond to questions from non-PLAR learners and workplaces about giving credit through PLAR

5. What has your experience with PLAR taught you?

   Probes:

   how has it affected your attitude toward PLAR

   your skills in assessment

   your teaching activities

   your attitude toward adult learners

Session Agenda:

The Moderators will ensure the following activities take place.

Introduction of Moderator and assistant.

Explanation of the purpose of focus groups in general, and specifically this session

Assurances that confidentiality will be respected, but otherwise acknowledgements will be published in the report

Participant introductions. Given that the session is only 2 hours long, a time limit should be set for this activity.

Establishment of ground rules: everyone listens respectfully to all viewpoints, no participant dominate the conversation, differing viewpoints are quite welcome but rebuttals are not.

The Moderator and assistant will watch for and ensure recording of non-verbal cues and communication.

In concluding the session, the Moderator will present some summary comments and ask for feed back on them. Participants should be thanked once again for their assistance with the Study.

Analyzing and Reporting

Immediately after the session, the Moderator and assistant will meet to discuss immediate reactions/first impressions regarding themes, discussion threads, ambiguities, attitudes, key words, non-verbal communication etc.

The Moderator is responsible for analyzing the range of responses, the common points of view, new ideas, unspoken messages, and comments expressing the big picture rather than the details of a single experience. The Moderator should make particular note of deeper analytical comments presented by participants.

One simple but effective method of organizing notes for analysis, is to colour code comments relating to the questions and "cutting and pasting" them together for analysis.

The Moderator's report should specifically address the four issues presented in the Outcomes section of this document as well as any additional topics that arise during the discussions. Also, the demographics of the participants should be recorded anonymously so it is important to ask for their gender, DOB, teaching status, discipline, program, and courses in which they did PLAR in the report. Attached is a form to assist with this, but providing the information is strictly voluntary.

APPENDIX M — FOCUS GROUP REPORTS

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS
ASSESSOR FOCUS GROUPS
COLLEGE AHUNTSIC
MARCH, 1999

1. The principal characteristics of the assessors interviewed

We consulted seven teachers that participated in a prior learning recognition experience as assessors. The consultations took place in two sessions as a result of time constraints on the part of some teachers. A first meeting lasting 90 minutes was held on the 11th of march 1999 at noon with 5 of the 7 teachers. A second group of two teachers was met on the same day at 16:30 PM and that meeting lasted 75 minutes.

Five assessors are regular teachers working full time at the college and the remaining two teachers are hired on a "by the lesson" basis.

Six of them are males.

They work in five different teaching departments:

- Law clerk
- Electronics Engineering Technology
- Business Administration
- Geodesic and Civil Engineering Techniques
- Ambulance Technician

2. Types of experience acquired by the interviewed assessors

There is an institutional policy of learning assessment that provides for the setting up of a departmental committee to handle the demands for prior learning recognition. However the type of case handled and the different practices concerning prior learning recognition vary from one department to the other.

Thus, in one case, all of the prior learning recognition requests that one department handles concerns the entire programme of study and not a particular course. In another department, there are two types of request: prior learning assessment with regards to one course in particular or with regards to the entire programme. We must note, however, that these are mostly requests for prior learning recognition submitted within a framework of services offered by the college to the Canadian Armed Forces. In these cases, the jury approach involving a comparative analysis of the army's programme and those of the college is generally applied.

Some departments don't use exams or tests when dealing with prior learning recognition. They base their decisions on two data sources: the documents submitted by the candidate from his professional file and an interview. The documents submitted are of the following nature: curriculum vitae, employer training certificate, detailed experience certificate, task description. If necessary, the supervisors of the company where the experiences took place are contacted to get further details and validate the information.

Another department applies a three tiered strategy:

1. study of the documents submitted
2. an interview if necessary
3. an examination or test if required

Therefore, prior learning could be recognised solely based on the study of the candidate's documents, at the first stage. However, if the study of the documents doesn't provide enough information to make a decision, the candidate is invited for an interview. Finally, if the interview is also not sufficient, an exam bank is used.

The study of the professional file in lieu and instead of formal exams is very important according the teachers interviewed, because the training activities that the students tend to request recognition for are generally activities of the "work-study" or "project" type. In these cases, we easily understand that it's the assessment of the candidate's professional experience that constitutes the base for prior learning recogniton.

3. What they think of prior learning assessment

All of the assessors affirm that prior learning recognition services are **essential** and that they are a response to a real need from the students. They think that the education system must provide adults the possibility to recognise prior learning acquired in part at work or in training undertaken at the work place.

These teachers recognise that the members of the teacher's staff are the only ones actually able to carry out the assessment activities called for by prior learning recognition. The teaching departments must participate by setting up a committee in light of the fact that prior learning assessments increase the workload for the department and its members. Nonetheless, as they themselves say: " it's our responsibility and we must manage it." However, current remuneration seems insufficient and if the demand increases significantly, the departments would have difficulty in carrying out this responsibility.

Most assessors mentioned that the procedure, as they experienced it, is very **serious** and **rigorous**. The requests submitted are reasonable and pondered. They insist on the fact that at the beginning, some years ago, the services were introduced to adult students as a service available only to high calibre candidates subject to demanding standards: setting up of a professional file, accumulation of testimony and supporting documents, rigorous evaluation, etc. This approach had the effect of giving the prior learning recognition service a reputation of high standards and rigor that tended to discourage adults from submitting requests that were either ill-founded or not founded.

The departments that developed assessment examination practices feel better equipped to respond to the number of requests that could be submitted by adults. Those that base their practice of prior learning recognition on the study of the professional file also consider themselves well prepared to handle the service, in spite of the fact that they are clueless as to how handle a request from a "self-taught" person.

On the whole, the assessors interviewed believe in prior learning recognition. They consider it an **adult's right** as well as an essential part of the education system. They are happy to be able to provide this service to adults. They see themselves participating in a rigorous and reliable service. They wish to improve certain aspects of the procedure so as to make it even more efficient.

4. The main impacts for an adult in training

The principal advantages of prior learning recognition perceived by the teachers for the adult student are:

- A reduction in the training period
- A faster way to get to the job market
- A gratifying experience for adults

In some cases, prior learning recognition services provided students the possibility to obtain a professional practitioner's license in the province of Quebec.

As far as disadvantages are concerned, the teachers see very few of them. One of them mentioned that, in the case of the recognition procedure as applied to an entire training programme, the adult can encounter some difficulties in his professional practice coming from secondary and tertiary competencies that are less well mastered. As a matter of fact, the assessment procedure does not allow one to verify, in a detailed manner, these competencies that are less central. However such a disadvantage is considered quite negligible in comparison to the advantages resulting from prior learning recognition.

5. Things to improve

The teachers are unanimous in naming one aspect that is problematic and that should be modified: **the obligation** to **provide a numeric mark** following the evaluation. Before, the evaluation was made on a "pass/ fail" basis. However, in the past couple of years, as a direct result of the rules concerning funding set-up by the Ministry of Education, the system has been demanding that a numeric mark be attributed to the student.

Because an important part of prior learning is made on the basis of the study of the professional file to be able to recognise specific learning with regards to a course or perhaps a project or work study program, teachers find it difficult to attribute a mark and would like to return to the old "pass/ fail" system or "competency acquired or not acquired".

A part from this inconvenience, the teachers consider the prior learning recognition process satisfactory on the whole. This positive assessment doesn't stop them from pointing out certain aspects that could be better articulated.

The **remuneration** offered to the department so as to offer prior learning assessment to adult students is judged to be insufficient. In the current context were the demand is relatively small, the teaching departments are capable of taking on this task. However in a context of increased demand, the departments could not keep up this rhythm without adjustments made to the remuneration system as it is now.

It was pointed out that for already a few years, **teacher training** for prior learning recognition is non existent. It would be interesting to provide new teachers that participate in PLAR the benefit of specific training activities to help them in this regard.

The **tools** are not sufficient in various specialities. As soon as demands are made for prior learning recognition involving work study or project type courses, it becomes more difficult to provide the service without having valid assessment tools : examinations, practical tests, etc. The resources to develop such tools do not exist or there are very few of them.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Finally, some teachers note that there is always room for improving two specific aspects directly related to the service as it is provided to adult students.

- firstly, provide complete information from the outset so as to properly guide the adult student through the procedure.
- secondly, be sure to provide adult students the tools that enable them to perform when undergoing evaluation. This last point casts light particularly on the fact that the course material must always be accessible to the adult and that a preparatory period must always be granted the student before the assessment takes place.

6. PLAR's impacts on their teaching practices

The teachers interviewed had little to say about the impacts that their experience of prior learning recognition had on their practice as teachers. We can perhaps relate the low number of comments to the fact that the experience of most of the teachers interviewed started quite a few years ago now (more than ten years ago in some cases).

Some younger teachers indicated that their experience in prior learning recognition allowed them to acquire greater knowledge and to strengthen their grip of their specific subject matter and to acquire a more integrated view of the programme in which they teach.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS:
PLAR LEARNER INTERVIEWS
COLLEGE AHUNTSIC
FEBRUARY, 1999

The principal characteristics of the participating students

It proved impossible to get a group of adults together in Montreal that had used the services of the prior learning recognition. We therefore chose to proceed with individual interviews over the telephone. We carried out interviews with ten former students that had made use of prior learning recognition between the 23rd of February and the 2nd of march 1999. Half of the participants came from the Montreal area and the other half came from various regions of the province of Quebec.

The focus group consisted of nine men and one woman.

The people interviewed were undergoing studies in the following programs:

- Ambulance technician
- X-Ray Diagnosis technician
- Industrial Electronics Technician

The motivation to use the Prior Learning Recognition Service.

The persons interviewed availed themselves of the acquired learning recognition service basically for three reasons:

- To get recognition for experience gained from relevant work experience so as not to have to take certain courses like work training or projects
- To have previous training and work experience recognised in order to shorten the length of the training period required to update their professional qualifications to the new standards
- To have previous training completed outside Quebec recognised in order to obtain a permit to practice the profession in Quebec.

The people interviewed experienced prior learning recognition services in one of the three manners detailed below:

- prior learning was assessed with regards to a particular course in the programme, generally a course that included work training or a project.
- prior learning was assessed with regards to an entire programme of study by way of a series of theoretical exams and practical tests.
- prior learning was assessed by applying a group standard obtained by establishing the equivalencies between the college's programme of study and the entire group's previous training and previous work experience.

Their opinion of the prior learning recognition service

All adult students interviewed affirmed that, based on their experience, prior learning recognition works well. The preliminary information is clear, the forms are concise, the teacher - assessors do their job properly. More than one person summed up their view of the service by saying: **"there is nothing to change"**.

They feel their experience was properly assessed and that prior learning was appropriately recognised. Only one interviewee had the impression that some of his acquired competencies hadn't been properly recognised.

There is one shady point worth mentioning - the fees levied. Two interviewees mentioned that the fees were too high. Their feeling is that the fee shouldn't be linked to the number of course hours involved in the PLAR request. One of these two interviewees had to pay more than 1500$ because he had been evaluated for an entire 800 hour programme. Since then, the college has set a limit and such a situation cannot occur again.

Prior Learning Recognition Impacts

The adult students interviewed see little impact stemming from prior learning recognition. However, they did highlight two specific effects:

- PLAR has the advantage of reducing the length of their training period
- PLAR along with the extra training, instils in the practitioner greater professional confidence in his work.

Improvements to be made

Aside comments pertaining to costs judged a little high sometimes, the interviewed adult students didn't have any other suggestions to make.

One of the interviewees who was assessed for the entire training program, of more than 800 hours, indicated that there were too many exams and that their format was too heavy. He suggested that teachers construct some assessment tools that could enable them to cover the entire program in a more integrated manner.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS:
ASSESSOR FOCUS GROUP AND PLAR LEARNER INTERVIEWS
COLLEGE OF THE NORTH ATLANTIC
FEBRUARY, 1999

Faculty Focus Group

This focus group was formed as a result of the PLAR Cross-Canada Study on PLAR. This focus group was held in St. John's, Newfoundland at the College of the North Atlantic. Out of the twenty faculty members invited, seven faculty members participated in the focus group. One of those seven faculty members could not make it to the focus group so she put her comments in writing. She felt strongly about PLAR and wanted her comments to be included. The focus group consisted of 4 females and 3 males. The facilitator started the focus group session by describing a brief history of the Cross-Canada Study, establishing focus group ground rules to reference during the session, and had introductions of facilitator and members. The faculty focus group was held on Friday, February 19, 1999.

General Opinions on PLAR

Generally, the faculty members agreed with PLAR and the concept of students using experiential learning to their benefit. All faculty agreed that the college should not expect a student to re-learn what they already know. Depending on the program the student is studying, the amount of learning before entering the program may differ to a great extent. Many students from the Information Technology programs at the college challenge courses through Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition because of the vast self-learning of computer programs that occur in today's youth. All faculty agreed that students should not be burdened with being forced to take pre-requisite introductory computer courses when they know this material already. An example of this that a faculty member shared was, one of his students was involved in creating websites for local companies before entering the college – why should the college force this student to complete the basic Introduction to Computers and basic Internet course?

There was also a consensus that there was a lot more that could be done with regards to PLAR. All agreed that there were many grey areas of PLAR that were not clear cut and outlined in the form of a faculty guide or policy. These "grey areas" included the following:

- the lack of effective marketing to the general public before entering the college system;
- the increased faculty workload as a result of PLAR requests; the issue of a PLAR Exemption on a transcript vs. a percentage mark for PLAR credits;
- the scheduling of instructors to perform the PLAR challenge.

A general recommendation among all faculty members was that there should be a full-time PLAR Co-ordinator to organize faculty assessors for challenges, provide training for assessors on a regular basis, conduct PLAR orientation sessions with students, and screen PLAR challenge requests.

Recommendations for Improvement of PLAR

There were many recommendations for improvement from the focus group of assessors. These included:

Clear deadlines for students to challenge courses. This would benefit both the student and the faculty. The current exemption process is similar in that there is a deadline date for all students to apply for exemption process. PLAR should be set up the same way.

Marketing of PLAR. The current dissemination of information regarding PLAR should be improved to the student first entering the institution. It should be clear to the potential student what PLAR is and what is expected of them when challenging courses.

Clear guidelines for faculty and students. There should be clear, concise guidelines for faculty and students in the form of a PLAR handbook.

Instructor Compensation. Currently, instructors are conducting PLAR challenges over and above their regular instructional hours. When this is the case, compensation should be given to those instructors or better yet, PLAR should be worked into the regular instructional weekly hours.

Assessor training needed. Regular, ongoing assessor training is needed. Basic training was provided to many instructors throughout the college, but regular training is required for faculty involved in the assessment of prior learning.

Advantages and Disadvantages of PLAR

There were many advantages of PLAR determined at the focus group. Some advantages were noted. PLAR saves time for the student's workload; the student possibly saving money by successfully challenging a course and PLAR prevents duplication of learning.

Some of the disadvantages discussed during the focus group included views that: theory-based courses may present difficulties for student with experiential learning; the challenge exam may be text-specific; the use of "Exemption" on transcripts instead of a percent grade. This was discussed with regards to employers wanting to see a specific percentage of the students' knowledge. Lack of peer interaction or social interaction was determined as another disadvantage of challenging courses through PLAR.

Advice to other PLAR assessors

Upon asking the focus group this question, there were many responses as to the advice they would give future PLAR assessors. Some of this advice included:

- Look at PLAR as a positive process for students
- There are other methods of assessment to use besides a challenge exam, for example demonstration, performance evaluation, and oral exams
- Ensure that the faculty assessor is adequately trained in PLAR methods and assessment techniques
- Make sure the assessment method covers both the theoretical and practical aspects of the course

What have assessors learned from their PLAR experience?

Some of the main aspects learned from the focus group assessors were that PLAR is just another assessment tool. It is very similar to regular classroom assessment. The end result should prove the student's level of learning in the subject area. Also, adults challenging courses through PLAR are more mature learners and they are more time-management oriented that the average learner.

Another recommendation discovered through the PLAR process is that there should be a PLAR Co-ordinator and PLAR team that is easily seen by the student entering the institution. Students should know before entering a program what is expected with PLAR.

Learner Focus Group

Originally, the College of the North Atlantic was to conduct a focus group for PLAR learners who have accessed Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition for courses within post-secondary programs at the College. After much coordination, the focus group could not be set up due to low attendance. As an alternative, a telephone interview with each student was arranged. There were six learners from the 1996-1998 academic programs at the College in St. John's, Newfoundland. The programs the interviewees were enrolled in were Computer Studies, Electrical Engineering, Early Childhood Education, and Computer Support Specialist. There were 2 males and 4 females involved. The interviews were geared towards conversations between the interviewee and facilitator as much as possible.

How the learners decided to avail themselves of PLAR

There were a variety of answers to this question. One student answered that PLAR was a mandatory requirement of the Early Childhood, Distance Education pilot project. Another student answered that she was currently working in the Computer Support Specialist field but did not have a diploma. Therefore she challenged a number of courses with the Computer Support Special program. Another student decided to challenge just one course based on her experience with the Office Administration field. Another student heard about PLAR through the Student Services Office and decided to challenge two computer courses based on knowledge and skills acquired through self-teaching.

How well does the PLAR process work?

All students who participated in the interview process thought that PLAR was a great process. Some comments made were: experience counts for so much when you are looking for a job so it should count just as much when challenging for credit. There was one concern from a student that the best person did not necessarily conduct her assessment. The instructor should have been the assessor whereas in this case the manager of I.T. was the assessor (because the person challenging also worked at the college).

Did the learners benefit from the PLAR process?

All students said that the PLAR process benefited them in some way. Some benefited in that they received credits for the courses they challenged. Others benefited from how it made them feel after it was completed. Some learners had a sense of pride because the learning that took place outside the college really meant something. Another student stated that the PLAR process was very well organized and it encouraged her to think about the future, to document all training and experience that she will experience in the future.

Did the PLAR process increase the learners' self-esteem?

All students felt that the PLAR process increased their self-esteem because they were acknowledged for the experiential learning they had received outside the classroom. One student, after completing portfolio development, reported that although it was hard work and time consuming, she felt a sense of accomplishment and reward for all those years hard work. Another learner stated that she felt that because she was working in a position without possessing the paper credentials, she was being second-guessed by her peers. After she challenged the courses in the program in the field in which she was working and was very successful, she felt she had proven she could do the job.

What needs to be changed in the PLAR process?

The general comments for the PLAR process was that the process was a good one and it benefited many students at the College. The only change foreseen by students was to have more information up front and more people made aware of this process when they first enter the college or first apply for a program. Also the fact that depending on the program, there should be more methods of assessment available. In one of the student's programs, the only method of assessment was challenge essays.

What advise would you give to other learners?

The consensus among all interviewees for this question was that they would tell the learners that the PLAR process was a great process for anyone with experiential learning. One student stated that she would tell students on the wait list to start gathering all the data and records of learning that have occurred before they enter the college system. The student would be better prepared to start the PLAR process if they had all of the documentation before they started. It would be less time consuming if the student did some preparation ahead of time. Another student said that she would educate learners that there is more than one assessment method that assessor could use. If the learners were educated more about PLAR, they would have more information to talk to the assessor about, especially when choosing assessment methods for evaluation.

Summary

Both assessors and learners thought that PLAR is a good process and should continue in the college system. Although both groups noted that there is still a long way to go with regards to educating the general public on the process and procedure behind PLAR, the process works well and is beneficial to the learner and the assessor. The learner has an opportunity to get credit for experiential learning, and the assessor has an opportunity to increase their assessment skills in the area of experiential learning and course comparison.

153

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS:
ASSESSOR'S FOCUS GROUP
DOUGLAS COLLEGE
JANUARY, 1999

Seven faculty members from various programs in Office Administration and in Child, Family and Community Studies attended a focus group regarding their experiences as PLAR assessors. Some had extensive experience, while a couple were relatively inexperienced. Most, but not all, had recent experience with PLAR at Douglas College.

Focus group participants were asked a series of questions according to the National Study's research protocol. The results were then summarized and classified by Douglas College personnel according to the National Study's four research topics for the assessors' focus group. More detailed comments from the focus group appear in the attached report (arranged according to topics emerging from the focus group, rather than according to the framework used in the National Study.)

Concept of PLAR

- Assessors' understanding of PLAR has evolved. This reflects developments in the field of PLAR over the years, as well as individuals' growing experience as advisors and assessors. They see their own involvement as a journey, rather than a destination. Their concept of PLAR both reflects and influences their changing educational philosophies.
- Aware of challenge exams, but discussion focussed on portfolios and workplace assessment.
- General support, sometimes enthusiastic support, but recognize there are aspects of PLAR as practiced at this college that could be improved.
- Different methods are needed for different circumstances, e.g. what might be appropriate in one program may not be appropriate elsewhere.
- See a greater need for PLAR as the need for credentials increases in the workplace.
- Discussion was in the context of applied/career programs, including professional growth and career advancement opportunities for college graduates. Much discussion, however, of the pedagogical impact of PLAR (both for candidates and the implications for classroom instruction and assessments). Focus group participants spoke as educators, not as workplace trainers. They considered PLAR not only from the perspective of what it can do for candidates vocationally, but also in terms of general education.
- Vocational context for PLAR candidates was seen not only in terms of earnings and job promotions, but also in terms of the professionalization of employment fields and access to occupations.
- Depending on the industry and occupation, workplace assessment may be very beneficial.

Experiences of PLAR

- For those who had a reasonable amount of experience with PLAR, it proved rich professional development. They found it sufficiently stimulating that they were willing, at least initially, to do much work on an overload basis.
- Generally the experiences and impressions were positive. They have become increasingly positive as they gain more experience, and as the College improves its policies and procedures. A minority had reservations about quality.
- Hard as a beginning assessor. Appreciated any mentoring and peer support they received.

- Could not separate what they were discovering about learning through their PLAR activities from their practice in the classroom. Found that they were changing their classroom instruction and assessment, e.g. specifying learning outcomes and ensuring assessment methods match intended outcomes, as a result of their PLAR experiences.
- Encountered weaknesses and problems, some of which they feel have been addressed, some of which remain problematic. (See section below, Ways to Improve PLAR)
- Lots of work for the assessor as well as for candidates.
- mportance, and sometimes the difficulty, of helping candidates understand the difference between having an experience and identifying the learning obtained through that experience.

Ways to Improve PLAR

- Clear criteria are essential, e.g. learning outcomes and required levels of achievement. Be clear at the beginning, so that advisors know what assessors are looking for. Clear requirements for portfolio format and content make for well-prepared portfolios, and hence make them easier to assess.
- Need to provide a means for PLAR candidates to "top-up" gaps in their learning in order to be eligible to receive PLAR credits. Once those credits are awarded, they need good access to regular courses to complete the credits needed for a credential, e.g. access to programs that accommodate part-time students on a year-round basis.
- In some programs, the lack of social interaction and cohort formation with other students could mean learners miss some intangibles in their program, or that they may feel excluded when they join regular courses in which students already know each other.
- Faculty workload issues need to be addressed. Extra compensation on an overload basis is not sustainable on a large scale. PLAR needs to be properly resourced.
- Team assessing is nice.
- Strategies to help candidates distinguish learning from experience.
- Marketing to help potential candidates recognize that PLAR may be applicable to them, and to help in predicting the number of PLAR candidates at any given time.
- Don't over-assess. Quality, not quantity, of assessment.
- Opportunities for advisors and assessors to meet periodically to discuss their experiences of PLAR.
- Needed changes are evolutionary in nature, rather than sudden or dramatic changes.

Effects of the PLAR Experience on Other Instruction, Relationships with Students and Views on Learning

- Effects on faculty can be profound, leading them to rethink their educational philosophy and classroom practices. PLAR is not an "add-on" or peripheral part of their role as an educator. It is relevant to their central role as faculty, helping them to become more reflective and explicit as educators.
- Can have a big impact on classroom teaching.
- Encouraged faculty to focus on how they can help learners learn how to learn, e.g. reflective, critical thinking, and self-assessment skills.
- Learners gain confidence and self-esteem. They learn how to learn and become more reflective. However, during the process of PLAR, it is common for them to experience a crisis of confidence. Furthermore, PLAR can be personally risky because the learner may find out they were mistaken about their level of skills and knowledge. In the case of workplace assessment, their deficiencies can be quite public and potentially awkward.
- PLAR is both learner, and learning, centered.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS
PLAR LEARNERS' FOCUS GROUP
DOUGLAS COLLEGE
FEBRUARY, 1999

Introduction and Methodology

A large, federally funded study, overseen by an advisory committee consisting of educators and institutional representatives, is examining Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition in considerable detail at seven colleges across Canada. Douglas College is serving as one of two research partners from western Canada.

Using questions and procedures developed for the National PLAR Study, Douglas College's Institutional Research Office convened a focus group for 90 minutes on 23 February 1999. The eight participants consisted of students who had received credit for one or more courses through Prior Learning Assessment at Douglas College. Their views and experiences were sought to round out the statistical data that constitutes the main source of information for the national study.

Recruiting focus group participants proved challenging. Close to one hundred telephone numbers of students who had received some PLAR credits in 1997/98 were called in order to recruit sufficient participants for this single focus group. Some telephone numbers were no longer current, some students were entirely unfamiliar with the term "PLA" (even though their academic records showed they had received PLAR credit), a number of students were working and could not attend a focus group over the supper hour, and so on. Eventually, fifteen individuals indicated they would attend the focus group, with several of these unwilling to confirm their attendance. Eight actually attended, two below the target of ten participants.

Six of the eight participants were female. Three were in their thirties, and the remaining five were age forty or over. Their educational background varied, with a couple having secondary school graduation, some having college or institute courses, and one reporting a university degree. None had less than a Grade 12 education prior to entering Douglas College.

Half the participants received PLAR credit for one course, and three received PLAR credit for three or more courses. Six of the eight received PLAR credit for a practicum (in a couple of cases, the PLAR credits were for both courses and a practicum.) The credits were awarded in the following programs:

Print Futures (Professional Writing)
Financial Services Studies
Home Support Attendant
Therapeutic Recreation
Child and Youth Care Counsellor
Classroom and Community Support Worker

One of the participants had received PLAR credit but had not yet enrolled in any other classes at Douglas College for personal reasons. Another participant, as reported below, was seeking to enroll in classes but was encountering barriers in the registration system.

The consequence of the random selection guidelines in the National PLAR Study for recruiting participants was a very diverse group. While this provided for a broad range of experiences, it hindered discussion because participants had little in common to share with each other. The first half of the focus group consisted largely of comments directed to the moderator, in response to his probing. Towards the end, participants were interacting with each other and the discussion proceeded with much less intervention from the moderator.

In this report, direct quotes from focus group participants are identified by the use of italics, whereas paraphrases appear in regular type. Additional comments from participants, in response to something previously said, are indented:

Participant 1 said such and such.
Participant 2's response is shown here by an indentation.
Participant 3 also made a comment on this topic.

Explanatory notes, provided by the Institutional Research Office, appear in square brackets [this is an explanatory note].

The headings and subheadings in the report were developed after the focus group had met. They are intended to categorize results based on what was actually said, rather than according to the topics the researchers hoped might emerge. The open-ended questions that were posed are listed in the appendix. Except for grouping comments into categories, the results of the focus group are not analyzed here. Some analysis appears in the accompanying summary, in which findings are reported according the research questions posed in the National Study.

Overall Reactions to PLAR

- *If they were doing a portfolio…expect to work hard at it. You're going to whip your insides out for a little while, because you're going to examine your every nook and crannies. It was very, very intensely structured…I found it exhilarating. I loved it. But it was hard work. You're having to relive certain segments of your life, to analyze more fully how you know this…. You have to be able to describe in a very clear way how you know it.*
- *We would have been bored to death if we had taken them [practicum] because most of us had been in the industry so long.*
- *I think it's[PLAR] incredibly useful…and respectful. It recognizes and honours the work that you've done and the knowledge that you have. I certainly recommend it…. I can't say I was invigorated by it. Every weekend for three months I was working on this [portfolio]. I was somewhat surprised it turned out as well as it did.*
- *It was a wonderful experience to be able to use, or be given credit for, our work experience.*
  - *It's a way of respecting working women. Finally.*
  - *When you've had thirty years' experience in an industry, that counts for a lot. You don't need a degree to know a lot, although times are changing.*
  - *You do need a degree for the theory part, but not so much for the practical side.*
- *I was really glad that there was that option, that I didn't have to spend time taking a course I already knew…. I would encourage anyone who feels they have the knowledge to challenge any program that they can. They [the college] should continue offering that option.*
- *I think the whole thing [PLAR] is pretty brand new. I think it's off to a really good start. I think it's definitely needed…. Colleges are for sure going the right direction.*
- *It was a confidence booster that I could do it. And I learned so much.*

[One participant spoke not so much on PLAR itself, but its role as a gateway to subsequent courses]:

I was very positive about it. Take it, definitely. The information [in subsequent courses] was very helpful. It builds your confidence.

It certainly cut years off [the time it would take to complete the program as a part-time student.]

PLAR Does Not Apply to All Situations or Individuals

- *Each area has to be assessed separately. You can't just group all of it together. Each course or program has to be assessed differently.*
- *Some people see PLA as an easy way out, of "not doing courses." The people that actually want to challenge and have some legitimate experience behind them, there should be criteria for them. The people coming out of high school think, "Oh, I'll challenge it. I'll challenge it."…. There should be some criteria like: if you're challenging it, you should have so many years' experience in the field. The same as a job applicant.*
- *It would vary from course to course, wouldn't it? From discipline to discipline.*
  – Six months in a job is not long enough for someone to challenge a practicum on the basis of knowing the job well enough. For some, the criteria could be more than two years.

Reasons for Participating in PLAR

One participant enrolled at Douglas College simply to obtain certification. Becoming unemployed in a short while was a possibility without certification. Another spoke of the need for a degree in order to advance in a particular employment field; it would take forever to complete a degree as a part-time student.

Finding Out about PLAR

Two participants had never heard the term PLA and asked what it was. They were familiar with "challenge" terminology:

- *I'm not following the lingo here.*
- *I was going to ask the same thing. PLA. I don't know what you're talking about.*
- *PLA isn't known to students that are applying [to the college]. How do they find out about it?*
- *I just happened to overhear someone talking in class. I said, "Hey, how did you get to do that?"*
- *In my company, one of the head people actually sits on the advisory for the department [community advisory committee for the program at Douglas College], so I think that's where it [the information about PLAR comes from.*
- *On the admission form, they should just have a question, "Do you plan to PLA any courses?"*
- *And maybe explain it a little bit. Explain it, and then the question.*

A couple of participants heard about PLAR through their employers. One said it was a partnership between the employer and the college. Another participant heard from others already in the program. Another thought PLAR had been mentioned in the program's orientation session. In one program, the instructor simply informed eligible students that they would be exempted from a practicum (the students had no decision to make regarding PLAR.)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

One participant spoke of the difficulty in getting started: *You walk in [to the college] and you're afraid. You don't want to go the Registrar's Office.* The college needs to be very clear about who should consider PLAR, i.e. people who have worked, and how much experience is needed. Then explain the process. A pamphlet is needed to explain that PLA is available, and how to do it.

It's difficult to decide just what you do know.... We don't sometimes give ourselves credit for having a lot of knowledge. You'll limit yourself.... You'll think, "Oh, I couldn't possibly do that" when, in fact, you do have that knowledge. You need more guidance around that, so you could decide just what knowledge you do have.

Understanding the Process

I found their language [PLAR portfolio instructions] very awkward. They would put three or four concepts and cram it all in one sentence.... Although I could figure it out, I felt for those who got discouraged because the language was very academic. It kind of insulted me because if someone is training to be a [human services occupation], they should be modeling the kind of communication methods they want us to use. That means, keep the language of your learners. It's up to you [instructors] to reach your learners. They were wanting us to stretch to their academic language. That wasn't so bad. If somebody was going to go on to get their degree, they would soon find out if they could handle that language or not. But I think that in the initial stages, they should have stuck with plain talk.... I've been taking courses since then and I haven't found them as difficult to understand. I was totally overwhelmed by the way they laid out...what your learning objective is. The objective, it had so many concepts in it. Show this and this and this when this happens or this happens, and what are the results. Like so many things to cover. It was just hard to grasp. I managed very well, but about half the people dropped out.

The language used in the PLAR process can be a barrier to students who learned English as a second language.

- *Once we found out what we were supposed to do, it was okay. It was just finding out what we're supposed to do.*
- *When we finally got the information [about what was required to PLA a practicum], there were many questions about what would be acceptable. So it was very unclear. But having gone through it, I'm glad we did. It's okay now.*
- *It was really unclear at the start. The instructions were unclear and we weren't sure how to proceed.... It was the first year. We felt like guinea pigs. We also though, "We can't be the first people to ask you for credit. We can't possibly be the first people." And they [instructors] never came up with an answer.*
- *We filled out all the wrong forms.... That's how we figured out we were guinea pigs.... We went to the Registrar's Office and got the challenge forms, filled out the challenge forms, went to the instructors to get them signed. They signed them. And they came back to us and told us we had all the wrong forms.*

Returning to Learning

- *I hadn't been at school for thirty years…. It was a bit of an adjustment.*
  - *You basically have to learn to be a student again.*
  - *I had kids at university. Okay, kids, help me out here….*
  - *That's a good example, to show your kids you were going back.*
  - *They were rather proud of me.*
  - *The kids don't say much, but you can see they get a big kick out of it.*

- *More and more adults, and middle aged people, too, are going back to school. Are having to. Society is dictating that, and yet colleges really aren't equipped to handle that…. They don't serve adults as well as they do younger people.*
  - *[Colleges should be] acknowledging that we do work full-time.* Services such as the bookstore, the cafeteria, and the Registrar's Office are sometimes closed when part-time students are taking courses.

PLAR Process

One participant went through the PLAR process as part of a group. The employer told a group of employees about the opportunity to do a six course program at Douglas College, with some of the courses available for challenge (the term "PLA" was not used.) Twenty eight employees wrote the challenge exams and were, for the most part, successful. Several dropped out after the first course, while others dropped out subsequently. The focus group participant found the courses very useful.Another participant received PLA credit for a single course, a course which required a product to be produced at the end:

My experience sounds different than yours…. I just had to do a project. It was totally unsupervised. I was given a guideline. I had six weeks to do it…. It sounds like others had some sort of program that they did. Mine was totally on my own. That was fine. I prefer to work that way. I can do it at my own speed and at my convenience. I didn't have to show up and take time off work.

Yet another participant felt supported and said that assistance from an advisor was available if need (a service the participant did not use because friends in the field could help explain terminology and instructions.)

- *It wasn't that hard. It was a lot of work…. Once you were in the [advising] course, it was clearly laid out what was expected of you. I think a lot of people were initially overwhelmed. It should have been explained…. It was presented as "Come to school. You can get 15, 16 credits. You just have to do this little bit of work." And it wasn't that way at all. That's what they told employers and everybody: "Want to get twelve easy credits?" It didn't work that way. It was a lot of work. And you didn't realize how much work you had until you had already committed yourself to it.*
- *I am intrigued that there was something outside of that [particular method of PLAR]. I had no idea. It's good.*
- *It sounds like challenging is a lot easier that this PLA [portfolio] thing. It's much less intimidating.*

Portfolio

- *It was a lot of paperwork, but even so, it was beneficial.*

It took three months to produce a forty page portfolio. Having work in the field for many years, the participant received PLA credit for all courses in the program except four (over three quarters of the program.) The PLA work was done independently, not in the context of an advising course.

- *I really liked it. I found that just like the instructors say in describing what is going to happen to you as you go through this [preparing a portfolio], they say you're going to find out just how much you do know, and you're going to keep on discovering more and more how much you know.*

Practicum Exemption

- *I thought I'd be bored having to go to another.... facility and follow someone around when you actually do that work [in your own job.]*

One participant was automatically exempted from the first practicum in the program because of previous work experience. The approach in another program was to have PLAR candidates provide documentation regarding the skills and knowledge in the practicum, and then to demonstrate the required skills very briefly in another worksite.

- *I though it was great.... It saved me from having to use holidays to work for free for somebody else.*
  - Another participant agreed that it was nice not to have to take time off work and lose wages, or to use vacation time to do a practicum.

Transfer Credit

One participant received transfer credit for a course taken at another college for which there was no pre-existing transfer arrangement in place:

- *It was really easy.... I got the course outlines [from each college.] I took the two of them and said, "Look, they're identical."*

Experiences After PLAR

Structural Barriers in Registration

[These comments about registration reflect Douglas College's circumstances and are not inherent problems with PLAR. They refer to problems some participants had in registering in the courses they needed to complete a credential, after having received credit through PLA.]

One of the problems was simply that courses were not available in the evening. Another problem was that priority was given in some programs to full-time students, so that seats were not available for part-time students.

- *I know I'll probably never finish the program because I'm not able to take time off work.*
  - *I would even go in the day if I could find a way to get into the class. The classes are always full.*
  - *I have got in by begging at the door.... "Please take me." It's kind of pathetic and you can't always get in that way.*
- *[The college should] see them [PLA candidates] through.... I see no point taking it that far and then leave them hanging [by not enabling them to complete the courses needed for a credential.]*

Subsequent Course Work

After using PLAR to complete the first of a sequence of two courses, the learner may not know the format the instructor expects when enrolling in the second course:

It took a couple of assignments to get the feel of what was expected — things others in the class learned in actually taking the first course.

When asked about the impact of PLAR on social cohesion, i.e. the impact of joining a group of students who had been in previous classes together, a participant noted that part-time students may not have that cohesion in any event. Furthermore, it may be difficult for older students to bond with younger students regardless of whether the PLAR process was used.

Suggestions for Improving PLAR

A participant who found the PLAR process to be "great" nevertheless observed:

For others it wasn't successful, not because of English barriers.... I kept wanting them [instructors] to keep it simple.... If they're using language that's beyond you....

Students who are close to completing their programs, regardless of the number of credits obtained through PLAR, should receive registration priority.

- *The one thing I didn't like was that I believe you paid the same cost to challenge as to take the course. That seemed a little much when I had already paid for it or learned it some other way. I can't remember exactly if you paid the full fee, but I believe you did. An adjustment of some kind would be appropriate.*
- *We were joking. We said, "Do you have any credits for sale?"*
- *I was quite willing to pay for the whole thing if they'd just give it to me and let me get on with my life.*

The Registrar's Office should be more knowledgeable about PLAR. Make sure everyone knows. *But people are really helpful when things are not working out well.*

Facilitate admission to the program and registration in courses after having received PLAR credit for courses that are part of the program.

The college should provide some documentation at the end of the PLAR process to say that the learner had successfully earned credits.

- *I didn't receive anything, either. So I checked with the Registrar. I thought I'd better make sure it's there. So I asked for a temporary transcript.*

When a portfolio is required to PLA a practicum, provide information sufficiently in advance so that the candidate can submit the portfolio and know whether he or she has been successful prior to the practicum. Unsuccessful candidates would then still have time to do the practicum.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS
ASSESSOR FOCUS GROUP REPORT FOR PLAR
RED RIVER COLLEGE
JANUARY, 1999

Summary

Assessors from Red River College, who were involved in the national Cross Canada Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) study focus group, discussed what they thought of PLAR, its process, its effect on them and how PLAR might be improved. This report summarizes these findings.

Background

The PLAR assessor focus group was held at Red River College on Friday, January 22, 1999 from 11:30 to 1:30. This focus group was part of the national study on Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR). Maria Turner, Director, Program Review and Development at Red River College, conducted and recorded the focus group session.

The interviewees, referred to as assessors in this report, came from various disciplines, programs, and courses (ie. Communications, Dental Assisting, Early Childhood Education, Health Care Aide and Nursing). All the assessors were female and all were full-time except one who was sessional. The focus group provided information to answer the following:

- What do the assessors think about the concept of PLAR?
- How do the assessors feel about the PLAR process in which they were involved?
- What do the assessors think should be done to improve the PLAR process?
- What effects has PLAR had on the assessors in relation to their instruction and evaluation activities, their relationships with adult students, and their views on learning?

The data has been sorted according to these outcomes. At the end of each outcome, quotes from the focus group have been provided.

Because all assessors interviewed were female in our focus group, the pronouns her and she are used.

Analyses

1. What do assessors think about the concept of PLAR?

a. General

The first comment in this session summarized the main focus of PLAR: it has real benefits for experienced workers because it offers recognition for learning from their work and life experiences.

People are using PLAR as a retraining tool. They use it as a map (assess what they have learnt) to form the basis of a plan for going into something where there may be more jobs, more need for their services, or more personal enjoyment.

There is a definite need for PLAR due to economics, personal and professional reasons.

The portfolio associated with PLAR activities is also being used as a tool in the workplace to get a better idea of people's skills and abilities. One assessor saw this as a nice evolution of PLAR outside of the educational institution.

Financial

PLAR has economic benefits because it allows people who are working to continue to work and to pick up academic credentials at the same time. People have less money and cannot afford to return to school full-time; however, they can pick up these credentials part-time. If they receive credit for learning they already have, they save both time and money. This is especially important when a vocation introduces regulations into people's positions after they have already been working in the vocation.

The financial benefits extend to providing a better way to spend money and time by splitting the certification requirements into two parts:
what do I already have?
what prior learning can I have assessed?
what is left to be done?
what ways are possible to complete the program (day, continuing education,distance education)?

By giving course credit for learning that students already have, students are less apt to be bored and will feel they are using their time more efficiently.

One assessor cautioned about promoting PLAR as a cheaper way to achieve academic certification. Although she felt that the costs were reasonable, some students have complained that the process was too costly (see Learner Report). The assessor felt that as PLAR expanded in the future, the costs might increase.

b. Active learners

In assessing PLAR, learners must be active and organize their own education and learning. It isn't for everyone because some people have difficulty thinking independently. PLAR is an independently led educational experience and people who choose this route are generally mature and motivated and may have limited financial means. They usually have quite a bit of work and life experience and can demonstrate it.

c. PLAR process

Some students think that PLAR is a quick process, but the process and assessment take time.

"Process" is a key word. With PLAR there is a step-by-step process; it isn't just identifying experience and writing it down. It is very involved. As an assessor you have to consider credits for previous learning, but you also need to consider how you identify skills and abilities throughout a person's career. This is time consuming.

2. How do assessors feel about the PLAR process in which they were involved?

What are PLAR's advantages and disadvantages?

Disadvantages

Learners may not feel that they are part of the learning community because they may not come to the classes. They may miss the interaction and sharing of ideas. Group discussions help you get more than just the facts.

If learners already feel they know something, they may resent having to "go through the hoops" of proving that they know it.

The PLAR programs are changing very fast and the growing pains may have presented some disadvantages. In other words, some students who did PLAR when the PLAR movement was just beginning, may not have received the quality assessing and advising that they do now.

The PLAR process may be difficult for people who don't have good English language skills. Unfortunately if the student has poor English skills, the college has limited resources for helping students to overcome their weakness in English. Some assessors felt that if students' English was poor, they had to spend extra time to analyze their answers on the challenges, and possibly interview them to determine if the problem was in the subject matter or with English. Another assessor brought up the issue that if students have trouble with English, then that is good feedback and students should consider options for improving their English.

Some learners do not have enough evidence of learning. Assessors may find it difficult if they've recommended to the learner to take courses rather than PLAR and the learner proceeds with PLAR, and possibly fails.

Advantages

Time flexibility is far greater for PLAR learners when compared to the day program schedule. Day-time schedules leave little time for part-time jobs, studying or spending time with families.

PLAR is a real success tool because you can focus on one thing at a time and usually do better. By doing only one or a few courses, people spend more quality time and effort trying to learn the material, not just memorize facts to pass a test. People are ready and motivated.

People achieve educational goals and gain self-confidence and self-esteem. They relearn how to be students—what the expectations are, how to find their way around the college and the library.

PLAR students get to put into practice what they learn right away, and because they have the practical experience, they can focus on the theories given in class and try the theories out.

Assessor Quotes:

"I think flexibility is really big."

"…I think that people feel a great deal of success in PLA because they do it when they are ready to do it."

"I think they are actually practicing the profession in the field, learning some theory or some different things and actually being able to put [concepts] into practice right away."

"So people that aren't proficient in reading and writing…are disadvantaged in the process. Unfortunately, those are many of the people that should probably be involved in the process…."

"I think a real advantage of PLA, from my perspective, is it's a real success tool."

"It is successful, not only in that they can achieve some education goals, but I think it is also successful from the point of view that they gain self-confidence and self-esteem."

3. What advice would you give to other assessors?

The following list was formed from assessors' comments:

Be flexible and open minded.

Ensure learners know what PLAR is and what they are getting themselves into. Tell them the difference between PLAR and the other ways to complete courses (day program, continuing education, distance education).

Remember that PLAR isn't just credit for experience. It's about getting the same learning as day-time, continuing or distance education but that it's a different process and requires learners to be very independent.

Tell learners that PLAR is a process where learning is evaluated.

Work with your colleagues; don't work alone.

Tell new assessors that there is a lot of documentation required, forms to complete and information to record. You need to find a quiet place to do this documentation and to properly assess and review portfolios. These activities consume huge amounts of time.

There is no one right way to do PLAR. You need to ensure the outcomes are met and feel comfortable that things are done in the best way for the learner.

When you have done a few PLARs and you think you know what to do and how to assess learners, you may get someone that doesn't fit your mold. Use one-on-one interviews to clarify your information about this type of learner.

Be aware of different tools; different tools work better for different things.

Remember that you are an ambassador for the college and a pivotal point in a learner's career.

Be accessible to learners in every possible way: fax, phone, voice mail, email.

Have a good grasp of the subject matter, in the course in order to assess.

Assessor Quotes:

"...it's a process where the learning is evaluated, and not so much the experience... we're assessing the learning not just your experience.."

"... they don't have to work in a vacuum because they're the designated PLA assessors in their department."

"... its been very helpful throughout the years to be able to touch base with Nursing and individuals in Child Care and just a little while ago I had a look at your information package, and was able to sort of adapt ours, and so it's nice to be able to touch base."

"... I think people should be aware of and use different tools for assessments. There isn't one tool that is right for all the assessments.... If you think there is only one way of doing it then PLA is not for you."

"You could be the reason the person decides to continue with their education and find out more information about this, or you could be the reason why they are turned off and go someplace else or just forget about it."

"It allows people...the opportunity to make choices."

"It's for people who really...have some level of maturity, some personal motivation, limited finances, quite a bit of experience where they truly believe that they have learning and they believe that they can demonstrate [it] without going through the hoops."

"There is a definite need for PLA and I think it's only going to increase with economics and everything."

"I think the word 'process' is a key word because it definitely is a process when you're going about identifying learning that you have...."

4. What do assessors think should be done to improve PLAR?

Public awareness and support

The first assessor said that more public information and better development of PLAR tools would improve the program. Another assessor felt that you would have a problem trying to do both without having a "cart before the horse" problem. In other words, the public doesn't know about PLAR, so they won't demand it. If they don't demand it, there will be little support for developing PLAR tools.

One assessor felt that although she had done some marketing and although some people were aware of PLAR in some programs, the general public does not know about PLAR.

Another assessor felt that the institution had to recognize that more support was needed for PLAR learners.

In some cases, employers are requesting improvements or certification for their staff. Some employers and unions are helping employees (eg, time off) to take courses and complete their certificates. Employees see this as a good thing because, in some cases, they can earn more if they are certified. PLAR could be improved through marketing to the public but also specifically target employers regarding the benefits for them.

Learning Objectives versus competency-based learning, learning outcomes

The group then discussed how they started with general and specific learning objectives and upgraded to a competency-based learning system. One assessor preferred learning outcomes, which were similar but not the same. She went on to say that outcomes must be established before PLAR could be done. Another assessor asked why they themselves should be completing learning outcomes when no one seems to be asking for them. On this same topic, another assessor said that the college can create course outcomes based on learning rather than objectives and said that Red River College has done a good job in this area. Support for this trend is growing and includes universities and industry.

One improvement that may be starting is the increased use of portfolios. Some high schools are getting students to document their skills, knowledge and abilities; hence, portfolios are starting to filter into the workplace and not just education.

Improvement in PLAR could also come from keeping courses in smaller modules, weighing objectives and separating objectives into mandatory and optional categories.

Assessors' tools

One assessor felt that assessors needed more training while another assessor suggested that other faculty needed to be trained and educated on PLAR - what it is, what its benefits and downfalls are. You need to understand PLAR before you can trust it and training helps you to grasp the concepts so you can do PLAR in a way that is fair to the learner and the assessor.

The group suggested using multiple and different assessment methods to improve PLAR. Sometimes, as in the day programs, methods of assessment are too rigid; people need different ways to show their skills because they come from varied backgrounds and learn differently.

Another idea put forward was to share information and experiences with each other and to have the opportunity to learn from those assessors who have "been there and done that."

One assessor felt there was little information on PLAR and there still isn't much, but that her original training has been modified and expanded through her experience.

Assessor Quotes:

"I truly believe that you need to have opportunities for some sort of training so that you can grasp the concepts so you can be free enough to do it in a way that's fair to you and to someone else."

"When we started there wasn't very much literature. There wasn't a whole lot of literature on prior learning assessment and there still isn't."

5. What effects has PLAR had on the assessors in relation to their instruction and evaluation activities, their relationships with adult students, and their views on learning?

What has your experience with PLAR taught you?

a. General

Assessors compared PLAR to traditional learning (e.g., set objectives, set ways of working through set assignments, and set ways of proving that learning has occurred). PLAR is different.

Although assessors might like to be more creative about how they implement PLAR, they sometimes have to resort to more traditional methods. For example, instead of using the interview process to determine a student's understanding, assessors give an assignment for the student to complete.

It is rewarding to see an applicant be successful and complete the PLAR process and to know that you've helped someone to be more employable.

While there is personal gratification, PLAR still presents a struggle because of existing workloads and the time PLAR requires. One assessor felt that she was not adequately compensated for the time she put into a PLAR task.

PLAR should be worth more than it currently is. PLAR should be a tool that is used in more than an academic or workplace setting; it should be something that we are taught from high school on. Everyone should routinely assess and document their learning.

b. Faculty issues

There is a need to educate other staff members about PLAR's philosophy, process and legitimacy, even though some staff won't buy into PLAR. One of the reasons that staff may not buy into PLAR is because of the extra time it takes.

Even though you may be the PLAR designate/advisor, your work may not end there. You still have to liaise with subject experts and others. This takes time.

c. PLAR and regular courses

PLAR is instrumental in causing courses to be overhauled. PLAR helps to improve courses by defining expected learning. When you examine PLAR and your regular courses, you can streamline content by avoiding duplication. You also have a better idea of how everything ties in. These are major benefits, but the time commitment is considerable.

d. Assessments

Sometimes students are asked to do more rather than less. Due to the subjective nature of assessments and due to the variety of students' capabilities, you have to stay reasonable and fair. You must evaluate objectively, not subjectively.

While PLAR can compare courses, find equivalencies and give credit, PLAR is not as good at trusting equivalencies of people's career experiences. Is it acceptable to just ask an employer about a person's skills? Assessors wondered about the rationale of watching someone perform on-the-job for two days. Assessors felt that employers and supervisors were trustworthy and could be given the course's objectives or checklists to check students' capabilities. Another view was that if the workplace did the assessment, assessors felt they might not be doing their jobs, or would have to ensure the workplace did an accurate assessment.

Most assessors have been in PLAR for quite some time. During this time, they have developed expertise and specifically, they've developed indicators or checklists of outcomes that must be met for their courses. Would it be possible to let someone else, such as other trusted professionals, check off these requirements as a student meets them? The view that other professionals could be used to help evaluate was in contrast with the pressure assessors felt that they had to ensure a person met the criteria.

Several assessors felt they over-assessed and mentioned that one of the reasons for this was to try to convince colleagues and college departments of a student's learning from experience and the right to credentials. One assessor defended the hesitancy of non-PLAR colleagues by emphasizing their inexperience with PLAR as compared with the focus group who was experienced with it.

The group discussed clinical or practical credits and one assessor stated that she is giving credit more often now than she did before, for this type of work. Another assessor raised the different components of experience and stated that by the time students get to the clinical aspect, they have already proven that they have met the academic and theoretical requirements. The clinical work seems like a guarantee and the assessor preferred to watch students show that they knew their work.

One assessor raised the issue that she wanted to ensure PLAR students have the appropriate skills because Red River College's name was part of the certificate.

e. Levels of assessment

The group discussed how far the assessments should have to measure. The example given in the discussion was about someone who has worked well in a smaller office but who isn't up-to-date in all the latest office duties, e.g., new software, new computers, etc. What competencies should this person be able to show? One response was that the person should meet the same learning outcomes as a beginning level individual who is walking out at the end of a program. If they come through and complete a program or they do PLAR, thy have acquired the same learning and met the same learning outcomes. These outcomes are driven by the workplace, so it would be fair to expect the person in the outdated office to upgrade.

Assessor Quotes:

"…instead of just looking at things as being black and white you really have to look at grey because people do have different ways of having the learning and you have to be flexible enough to put a value on a different way of demonstration and that's not always easy."

"I think sometimes you have to educate other members of the faculty…and some attitudes will never change."

"As an assessor I think it's rewarding to see the successful applicants go through the process…and that you have done your part to help them."

"I did it on my own time after 4 o'clock, and what they paid me was not what I spent. I spent far more time…"

"I think it will be kind of difficult to…convince people that this is good because of the workload."

"I'm not sure that it's an inordinate amount of time but certainly when you take your normal teaching load plus PLA it can seem to be the straw that breaks the camel's back."

"If the employer says 'well she has been doing it for ten years, and she's wonderful,' obviously she's been employed and doing it right, then who are we to say no, prove it to me."

"When I'm talking about the clinical piece that's the last piece; they have done everything else. They have met all of the academic or theoretical requirements before they get out there. "

"Like people say 'oh PLAR, yes,' but you know it's a lot easier to talk about it then to do it. And it's scary as an assessor having the weight of making sure this person is equal."

"You should have a respect for learners and for what they know. Trust that the learner wants to do this."

"You sort of lose some of your academic snobbishness, or whatever you want to call it. The college or the university isn't the only place that people learn."

"I was going to say, respect and trust. It's respect for the learner and you trust that they want to have the skills that they need, and they are not going to be happy without acquiring equivalent credentials either. For the most part they want to feel confident and good about their learning as well."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS
PLAR LEARNER INTERVIEWS
RED RIVER COLLEGE
FEBRUARY, 1999

Summary

PLAR learners, who accessed PLAR at Red River College, Winnipeg, and who were involved in the national Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) study, discussed why they used PLAR, what they experienced, how it affected them and how PLAR might be improved. This report summarizes those findings.

Background

The PLAR learners were interviewed individually between February 22 and 26, 1999. These interviews were conducted by telephone as part of the Cross Canada Study on Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR).

The interviewees, referred to as learners in this report, came from various disciplines as shown in the learners' portfolio table below:

	Partner Institution	Discipline	Gender
1	RRC	Administrative Studies	F
2	RRC	Early Childhood Education	F
3	RRC	Early Childhood Education	F
4	RRC	Health Care Aide	F
5	RRC	Health Care Aide/Unit Clerk	F
6	RRC	Accounting	F

The interviewer asked questions that would provide information to answer the following outcomes:

- Why did learners use PLAR?
- What did learners think about their PLAR experiences: what worked well and what did not?
- What effects did PLAR have on them in relation to life, education, and work?
- What do learners think should be done to improve the PLAR process?

The data has been sorted according to these outcomes. At the end of each outcome, quotes from the interview transcripts are provided. Because all learners interviewed were female, the pronouns her and she are used in this report.

Analyses

1. Why did participants participate in PLAR?

a. Work related

Usually decisions were related to workplace activities or economics. One decision to use the PLAR system was due to layoffs. The employer (hospital) was trying to help staff relocate by providing them access to educational upgrading. While one learner in the study was working toward changing her occupation, other learners were in the program to upgrade themselves for work, or to continue with courses previously taken. One learner, who ran a licensed family daycare, said she was taking the courses for both personal and professional reasons, and added that the college and the courses were easy to access.

b. Economics

One learner expressed that because she needed to work full-time, PLAR was the way to complete her diploma. She felt the course challenges were less expensive than using conventional modes of education and the course challenges were easier to access than courses through Continuing Education.

One learner felt that doing PLAR for a course was cheaper than taking courses. If she had had to quit her job to take the courses, she would have had a lot less money.

Learner Quotes:

"I'd just like to say that it's a wonderful opportunity for people to upgrade, at the same time maintaining their position in the workplace, which I think is very important right now because we are all having to upgrade."

"So once I learned that [didn't have to take classes for which she already had expertise] there was no question; it was less costly and I could do it quickly."

"So when I found out how easily I could access the college and the program I was quite excited about taking it and I really enjoyed the whole program."

"The reason I decided to do it was that I wanted my diploma but I also needed to work full-time.… and I don't think all of the courses are available through continuing education; whereas, they are all available through the PLA program."

c. Easier to obtain credits

Learners in general felt that it was easier to obtain credits and that PLAR worked well to save them time, energy and money. They appreciated the flexibility that the assessors allowed for writing exams when it was convenient for the learner. They also appreciated the fundamental part of PLAR, which is to recognize learners' experience and allow them to challenge for credit.

One learner who admitted to being a procrastinator still felt that the program benefited her. While she had trouble completing the work because of her procrastination, she was still happy to be able to continue working at her job during the PLAR process.

Learner Quotes:

"I wasn't able to stop work and go to school full-time so I found the [assessors] to be very helpful in that I was able to go in and write the exam on the times that were convenient to me."

"That the college recognized my experience, letting me challenge it instead of saying to me, 'no.' "

2. What did learners think about their PLAR experiences; what works well and what does not?

Learners expressed the view that the process was convenient simply because it existed and was offered at all. The program was offered in a couple of places and during different times. Another learner felt that the process was well thought out and appreciated the support the assessors gave her in her portfolio effort.

One learner compared PLAR to a government program that offered a competency-based assessment resulting in a classification. This learner preferred the diploma from Red River because she felt the diploma, which had more benefits, was also more transferable.

Learner Quotes:

"Well, it was all well thought out. It required the portfolio in order to prove that you did have the qualifications for the course, and that seemed to work well."

"I prefer the PLA because you do have a diploma at the end of it, and it's transferable and all of the things that go along with it—a diploma rather than a classification."

Most learners said they could not think of a better method or system than the PLAR. One learner mentioned that the challenge system, where you simply paid a fee and wrote an exam, was okay, but even she preferred PLAR assessments and felt they was a better way to prove her abilities.

Learners felt they could match [demonstrate] their learning fairly well through either a practicum or through courses.

a. Costs

One learner complained about a cost increase that occurred during her PLAR process. She had been warned of the increase and didn't like it, but in the interview, she still felt that PLAR was cheaper than the day program even after the PLAR increase occurred.

b. Logistics

One learner found that the initial package she received was a bit daunting; it was like looking at the entire first year of nursing.

The learning centre (i.e., resource centre where learners could access resources to prepare for their assessments) hours were too restrictive; one learner suggested that the centre be open at least one night per week.

Learners mentioned a few administration problems, but added that Red River seemed to have corrected them.

During one exam sitting, there were not enough exams for all of the students who were writing. This caused a half hour delay, which could have inconvenienced students who had to catch buses.

One learner said that she had had difficulty in having a faculty member call her back.

One learner has not been able to complete her PLAR because of the practicum's time requirements (120 hours in three weeks) while holding down a full-time job, which is a main reason for taking the PLAR route.

178

3. What effects did PLAR have on them in relation to life, education, and work?

a. Time and money

Most of the learners found time and money saved to be the major benefits. One learner said she was actually under a tight timeframe to complete either a degree or a certificate program. She found it faster to transfer the courses to Red River and complete the PLAR.

Again, the interviews found that one of the major contributors to the benefits was staff support.

b. Professionalism

Another benefit was to increase one learner's professionalism. She felt PLAR had afforded her more opportunities to be on both a Daycare and a Child Care Association board and she was also allowed to receive more in subsidies from the government once she had her certificate.

c. Timely studies

One learner, who was halfway through the program saw true benefits because she was able to directly relate her studies to her work and vice versa. This made the learning experience more valuable.

Learner Quotes:

"I'm working in the field at the same time that I'm doing my studies, so [I] can relate back and forth between the two."

"The [assessors] were very good to help me get through the second [portfolio] in a much shorter time."

"Well, the prior learning assessment only cost $50 per course credit and those courses are normally around $200 plus the cost of the textbooks."

All candidates were already employed except one learner who was applying for work and going for a second job interview during the time of this PLAR study.

4. What do learners think should be done to improve the PLAR process?

The following lists summarizes the learners' suggestions for improving PLAR:

- Increase the program's visibility; make it more known.
- Do skill assessments for childcare workers in their own home-based daycare, or in the daycare in which they currently work.
- Make a contact person available in each program who is more in tune with the special needs, responsibilities and commitments of adult learners.
- Ensure instructors have more work experience related to the PLAR program. (On learner suggested that teachers were a "little bit removed" from what learners actually do because they were nursing instructors and not Health Care Aides.)
- Examine courses for their similarity and streamline the requirements if there is duplication.

Learner Quotes:

"I've taken a few courses at RRC and my experience has always been very good."

"I wasn't there to really learn a whole lot, - I needed the certificate."

179

Most learners felt that nothing should be deleted from the program because it is already a "bare bones" program.

The learners offered some advice to new PLAR learners; specifically, they would:

- assure new PLAR students that they were going the right route by using PLAR
- suggest new PLAR students find a mentor, someone who is further along in the course and from whom they could borrow textbooks
- assure new PLAR students that if they did their homework, etc., the challenge exams and assignments wouldn't be too hard
- recommend good budgeting of time by setting a reasonable but tight time deadline (if the deadline was too long, they might lose interest)
- recommend new PLAR students meet their instructors and other students who were further along in the program
- investigate why learners wanted to do PLAR and ensure they had practical experience
- encourage them

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS
ASSESSOR AND PLAR LEARNER FOCUS GROUPS TRI-COLLEGE REPORT
CONESTOGA COLLEGE, FANSHAWE COLLEGE, MOHAWK COLLEGE
FEBRUARY - MARCH, 1999

During the months of February and March 1999, three Ontario colleges participated in a cross-Canada study of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR). Twenty-three assessors and twenty-six learners were selected to participate in a focus group session. A total of six focus groups took place, with two sessions held on-site at each of the participating colleges. Assessor and learner sessions were conducted separately, and discussions were recorded on tape. Participants were selected from a random sampling of assessors and learners from Conestoga, Fanshawe and Mohawk Colleges.

While individual assessor and learner reports are available for each college, this report combines the results that were common to all of the colleges. It compares the assessor and learner experiences of the PLAR process, and includes a listing of assessor and learner perspectives regarding the effects of PLAR, and their suggested improvements for the process.

THE PARTICIPANTS

The focus group participants represented a diversity of programs and experiences. Assessor representation included faculty from Full-time Studies, Continuing Education and Administration. Assessors were associated with the following programs: Health Sciences, Human Services, Community Services, English and Communication, Adult Learning, Training and Development, Business, Computer Applications, Floral/Fashion, Child and Youth Worker, Interior Design, French, Language Studies, Early Childhood Education and Nursing. Learners had challenged courses within disciplines such as Early Childhood Education, Business, Human Resources Management, Social Work, Recreation Leadership, Office Systems, General Arts and Sciences, and Portfolio Development. Both learners and assessors were predominantly female; 21 learners were female, and 17 assessors were female. Learners ranged in age from 22 to 49, and ranged in PLAR experiences as well. Some learners had challenged several courses through PLAR, while others had challenged one course. Many learners had completed in-depth portfolios as part of the process, whereas others completed challenge exams and/or submitted projects.

THE QUESTIONS

Each focus group was 1.5 hours in length and included five questions. The assessor questions were as follows:

- What do you think of PLAR?
- Focusing on your entire experience as an assessor, from the initial training session to student assessment, how could PLAR be improved?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of PLAR from the learner's perspective?
- If you were doing an orientation session for other PLAR assessors, what advice would you give?
- What has your experience with PLAR taught you?

The questions posed to the learners were as follows:

- What went into your decision to undertake PLAR?
- On the basis of your experience, how well does PLAR work?
- Did you benefit from PLAR? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?
- What needs to be changed, added or deleted to improve PLAR?
- What advice would you give to other learners?

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The focus group sessions provided an excellent opportunity for information sharing between assessors and learners. The discussion provided clarification on various policies and issues, and often encouraged a strong sense of camaraderie among the participants.

PLAR AS A CONCEPT

Overall, the experiences shared by both assessors and learners were extremely positive. The concept of PLAR was highly valued and viewed as beneficial by both groups. The key strengths noted by the assessor focus group participants were that PLAR offers respect for learners and recognizes the diversity of their needs and experiences. PLAR was described as "an equalizer", that offers "an incredible opportunity for learners." The assessors indicated that without PLAR, learners would not be able to achieve their goals nearly as efficiently as they can with PLAR.

The learners agreed that the efficient achievement of goals formed the backbone of PLAR's strengths. Their need for efficiency, particularly in terms of time and money savings, was a primary motivator for learners' involvement in PLAR. The learners' goals included: to acquire credentials for job promotions and career changes, to enhance job security and job performance, to complete a portfolio for future course challenges, and to fulfil program requirements.

The achievement of the learners' goals is facilitated by an environment that, according to assessors, recognizes the fact that "the learner has changed" and prevents the "devaluing experience of having to do 'seat time'."

PLAR AS A PROCESS

Despite the strong convictions that PLAR is a valuable and worthwhile concept, there were many process issues that were common to assessors and learners at all three of the colleges. These are described below.

Lack of Flexibility

"I find the idea (of PLAR) attractive because it means that the college is being flexible. The idea is attractive in its concept but is probably rather tricky to carry it out in some areas." – Mohawk College Assessor

While flexibility is inherent to the concept of PLAR, this flexibility is not as prevalent in the practical process issues within the college system. This dichotomy results in frustration for assessors and learners alike. One learner pointed out that the system needs to "adapt to the learners' needs, not the needs of the system", and assessor comments included, "the system is not as flexible as PLA. PLA is a totally different mindset of learning practice, and it seems out of place as an entry point in the traditional, structured system."

The lack of flexibility within the college system has resulted in assessors becoming "rule- benders" in an attempt to better accommodate the needs of students. Much of this rule-bending occurs to prevent unnecessary cost to the student. A frequent example cited by assessors across the three colleges is illustrated in this assessor's comment: "If they're not going to get the credit by taking the course, I don't have them pay."

Assessor Inconsistencies

Ironically, while the assessors' rule-bending is intended to accommodate learners' needs, this rule-bending can become a source of inconsistency for learners; each assessor may or may not bend the rules in certain ways, leaving learners subject to the individual biases of the assessor. The differences in the PLAR workloads of the focus group participants inspired a learner to comment that "there obviously needs to be more consistency in the assessor evaluations." A learner at another college echoed this sentiment in asking, "why should I have to go to the one teacher who expects me to write 2 pages when there's another teacher down the hall who only wants half a page?"

Assessors noted inconsistencies that impact upon learners as well. In two of the colleges, assessors were concerned about the possibility that assessors "…are more demanding of PLA candidates than (they) are of (their) students," and make them "jump through more hoops." Reasons for these higher expectations may derive from the desire to ensure the integrity of prior learning assessments, and avoid granting 'easy credits.' It was also noted that some faculty members see PLAR as a less valid process because they did not teach the material. An assessor made the following observation about faculty who do not necessarily support the PLAR process: "I've found that some faculty are more resistant to go along with the whole idea of PLAR, and put up a lot of stumbling blocks for the students…"

PLAR as a Learning Process

Interesting debate occurred at all of the colleges about the quality of the PLAR learning experience and whether or not it is supposed to be a learning process. One assessor noted that he sees "PLAR as looking at what they already achieved, not the process of learning." Assessors want learners to achieve their goals quickly, but they do not want to provide a "back door entry" into professions. The assessor's comment below suggested that a shift in philosophy from 'learner-centred' to 'learning-centred' might clarify the part of the issue:

"I think sometimes we misinterpret 'student-centred' to mean the fastest, easiest and most painless way for a student to achieve an outcome. And by looking at it in terms of the students wants this, saying 'give me all the credit I can get…it doesn't matter if they benefit me…I gotta get here, and I want the easiest way.' I wonder if we don't need to refocus ourselves to have learning as the centre. Make learning the easiest, most meaningful, most accessible for students, highlighting the things that augment learning, not just push them through the system." – Mohawk Assessor

Assessors would be heartened to know that the learning experience was important to many of the learners as well. While learners were generally pleased with the efficiency of the PLAR process, some reported that additional feedback from assessors would have enhanced their PLAR experiences. Their comments are below:

"All I got was something in the mail that said 'You got an A.'… I didn't really feel that I'd earned it. I knew that I had the experience but I didn't know how they knew I had the experience. I felt ready to go in and justify that I should be credited, but nobody asked me to." – Mohawk Learner

"I decided to take PLAR for two reasons: one, to finish the course early, and two, because I already had all the experience. Not that I couldn't learn anything, but that I already had enough experience." – Conestoga Learner

Conversely, there were other learners for whom goal achievement was the sole concern. One such learner noted, "I didn't get feedback but I didn't care. I got what I needed."

Need for Increased Standardization

The need for improved structure and standardized practices within PLAR was expressed in both the assessor and learner focus group sessions. Assessors felt that if policy reflected practice, rather than opposing it, these inconsistencies would not be an issue. Further, it was suggested that some inefficiencies of the current PLAR process would be remedied by increased standardization. For example, many assessors feel that the time they invest in PLAR goes unrecognized and uncompensated. If PLAR were standardized for factors such as hours per assessment, or learning outcomes for a number of related courses, faculty hours may be better spent and recognized in the process.

Increased standardization, particularly in assessor expectations and assessment procedures, was suggested in all of the focus group sessions. Neither assessors nor learners knew what was expected from them at all times. It was felt that improved training for assessors and orientation sessions for learners would be helpful, along with information packages and handouts for both groups. This information should be provided to faculty outside of PLAR to prevent learners from being "bounced around" from one information source to another.

It was suggested by both learners and assessors that faculty who conduct assessments should collaborate on similar courses, and use similar assessment procedures. This would simplify and clarify the assessment process for both parties.

Cost to the Learner

Assessors' Perspectives

Cost to the learner was a concern for assessors from all of the colleges. Despite assessors' efforts to prevent unnecessary costs to learners through 'rule-bending', the cost structure is still seen as an issue for learners. This is indicated in the following comment from a learner:

"There seems to be a lot of inconsistency around what (assessors) want, what they don't want, what qualifies and what doesn't, who's eligible for what, etc., but they want your nonrefundable $70 first!"

From the assessors' perspectives, the following specific issues were noted regarding costs to the learner:

There are occasions where a similar service is, or was, free to students, such as exemptions or non-PLAR challenge exams. The introduction of PLAR has meant that learners now have to pay for such service.

"I get a little embarrassed sometimes that I'm the person who says, 'no, I can't give you an exemption, go to PLAR. The student goes to PLAR, spends some money, an application comes back to me and I get a fee for assessing it…I wish somebody would just say, 'this is part of your job, there's no fee involved,' because it looks…awfully dishonest and wrong." – Mohawk Assessor

"Before PLA, in the 3rd week of September, we used to have challenge exams where students could write an exam at the beginning of a course…when PLA came in, that was the end of that whole process. We could no longer allow students to challenge for free. PLA in that case was an impediment, it was not an improvement. We already had a good system in place." – Conestoga Assessor

Some learners simply cannot afford PLAR, and in a number of cases, taking PLAR is more expensive than taking the course via traditional means.

"I've heard comments like, 'maybe I'll consider doing one, and when I have enough money, I'll do two.' That breaks my heart." – Mohawk Assessor

"I have some courses where it's cheaper to take the course than do PLAR." – Conestoga Assessor

Full-time students who have already paid their tuition fees have to pay to register with PLAR.

"If a student pays to take ten courses and gets credit for two, they want to know why the money they saved by taking only eight of the ten can't be applied against the PLAR fees. I think that's a pretty reasonable question." – Mohawk Assessor

"You've already paid full-time fees, so why should you pay again?" – Fanshawe Assessor

An assessor at Fanshawe offered a different perspective on the cost issue, pointing out that sometimes PLAR results in significant savings for learners:

"One of our placements is four months full-time. That is equivalent to seven courses…that's $800. Its different than challenging just one course."

Learners' Perspectives

Although cost to the learner was clearly a concern for assessors, many of the learners felt that participating in PLAR saved them money. Indeed, the most prevalent reasons for the learners' decisions to undertake PLAR were to save time and money. Some of the learners' comments are listed below:

"My first thoughts were of completing the credits with less financial cost to me." – Fanshawe Learner

"I saved a lot of money…" – Conestoga Learner

"If I didn't have PLA to challenge the practicum, I would have to lose money (from regular job) to go and do the placement." – Fanshawe Learner

Another learner at Fanshawe explained that she had been particularly pleased with a flat fee process she encountered. With this flat fee, she paid $100 to challenge four courses.

While the learners generally agreed that PLAR saved them money, there were some comments that mirrored those of the assessor groups. These were as follows:

"The cost of doing this was maybe a little steep. I think $50 would have been enough. The part-time program was more expensive to complete than full-time." – Fanshawe Learner

"There should be an administrative cost for processing the portfolio, but to assume the entire amount if it (course credit) isn't awarded, is a little unjust." – Mohawk Learner

Effects of PLAR

Time and money savings, and improved self-esteem for learners were the positive effects of PLAR cited by assessors and learners alike. The other effects varied according to perspective, and they are listed below:*Positive Effects: Assessors' Perspectives*

- increased openness to alternative learning and teaching methods;
- improved opportunities for curriculum revitalization and assurance of relevant learning outcomes;
- the experience of a "fun" and "dynamic educational process;"
- the provision of the "piece of paper" that some learners need to achieve their goals.
- increased "seat" availability for non-PLAR students;
- improved options for students from other countries.

Negative Effects: Assessors' Perspectives

- the time commitment required by assessors;
- accessibility challenges for students due to inefficient information processes and cost structure issues.

Positive Effects: Learners' Perspectives

- improved motivation to take additional courses;
- a valuable learning experience;
- a preferable experience for special needs students;
- an improvement in records organization;
- an opportunity to increase one's network.

The learners did not specify any negative effects of PLAR.

Suggested Improvements

The groups offered many suggestions for the improvement of PLAR. These are summarized below:

Assessors' Suggested Improvements:

- improve college flexibility to correspond with PLAR flexibility;
- change single course assessments to program based assessments;
- allow students to challenge credits before completing portfolio course;
- improve assessor recognition;
- improve initial information for students as well as assessor information;
- have all assessors complete their own portfolios;
- standardize challenge exams across similar courses;
- ensure that policy and practice are complementary;
- adjust costs so that it is cheaper to go through PLAR than to take a course; the blanket fee of $75 should be changed to reflect a direct relationship between the cost of the course and the cost of the challenge exam;
- universities to recognize PLAR courses from college system;
- the legitimization of PLAR within the college context to encourage recognition, support and/or compensation for those involved in the process;
- the development of an information package that would clearly explain assessor expectations to prospective students;
- improved cooperation or integration of the exemption and PLAR processes;
- improved assessor training that would include refresher courses, mentoring and networking opportunities.

Learners' Suggested Improvements

- incorporate an opportunity for learners to interact with one another;
- clarify the expectations that assessors have of learners;
- ensure that the differences in learning outcomes between level one and two courses are relevant and understood;
- improve consistency through establishing departmental and course standards;
- develop promotional activities that target employers;
- improve promotional activities to make more students aware of PLAR;
- improve support to learners going through the process.
- improve applicability of the portfolio for job search purposes;
- modify the system to, "…adapt to the learners' needs, not the needs of the system;"
- provide additional funding to allow the system to be flexible and support the needs of students;
- improve accessibility through effective advertising and ensuring availability for all students;
- improve services for part-time students so that they are on par with those for full-time students;
- allow part-time students to register at the same time as full-time students;
- improve the PLAR orientation session by ensuring that attendees understand the information presented and making it similar to the orientation sessions provided to daytime students.

186

APPENDIX N — STUDY PARTNER CONTACTS

Sandra Aarts
Fanshawe College of Applied Arts and Technology
1460 Oxford Street East
London, Ontario
N5V 1W2
(519) 452-4430

Deb Blower
Red River College
A-142 2055 Notre Dame Avenue
Winnipeg, Manitoba
R3H 0J9
(204) 632-2065

Roberta Burke
Mohawk College of Applied Arts and Technology
Fennell Avenue and West 5th,
Hamilton, Ontario
L8N 3T2
(905) 575-1212

Eleanor Conlin
Conestoga College of Applied Arts and Technology
299 Doon Valley Drive
Kitchener, Ontario
N2G 4M4
(519) 748-5220

Carol Ebner Howorth
Douglas College
P.O.Box 2503
New Westminster, British Columbia
V3L 5B2
(604) 527-5128

Brent Howell
College of the North Atlantic
P.O. Box 822
Corner Brook, Newfoundland
A2H 6H6
(709) 637-8530

Ginette Lamarre
College Ahuntsic
9155 rue St. Hubert
Montreal, Quebec
H2M 1Y8
(514) 389-5921

Joy Van Kleef
33 Harbour Square, #409
Toronto, Ontario
M5J 2G2
(416) 364-9103

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

NOTES

Update/Correction Sheet

Page 2 Paragraph three should read that College of the North Atlantic had "five regional colleges" prior to 1997/98, not nine.

Page 13 The note on Table 1 should be completed with " [illegible] individuals were counted annually. Traditional student data was based on a sampling of students."

Page 37: Database calculations resulted in changes to the data on the percentage of courses in which PLAR learners and TRAD students were successful. Bullet two should read: "Approximately 94% were successful and 6% were unsuccessful. The ratio of successful to unsuccessful grades was approximately 16:1." Bullet three should read "PLAR learners averaged a passing grade of 3.3 in all courses taken over the 5 years. Approximately 95% were successful and 5% were unsuccessful. The ratio of successful to unsuccessful grades was approximately 19:1." Bullet four should read "Traditional students averaged a passing grade of 3.1 in all courses taken over the 5 years. Approximately 91% were successful and 9% were unsuccessful. The ratio of successful to unsuccessful grades was approximately 10:1."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE